

THE IMPLICATION OF DIVINE SELF-CONSISTENCY FOR THE DOCTRINE OF NATURAL DEPRAVITY: A BIBLICAL-SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

(Excerpt from Virgil Warren's doctoral dissertation)

EXEGETICAL IMPASSE

A standoff has persisted in exegesis between Calvinistic and non-Calvinistic thought on the nature of human kind largely because no necessary 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” (cp. 36:26); 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” (Exodus 10:1; cf. 4:21; 8:19; 9:35; 10:20; 11:20; 14:4, 8, 17; Joshua 11:20; Romans 9:18); “and . . . he hardened his heart” (Exodus 8:15; cf. 8:32; 9:34; 1 Samuel 6:6; Proverbs 21:29); “his heart was hardened” (Exodus 7:22, 14; 9:7).
- (c) Ephesians 2:1 declares, “And he made you alive when you were dead through your trespasses and sins”; it 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; cf. 2 Corinthians 2:12); “I am sending you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God . . .” (Acts 26:17b-18).
- (e) “My Father gives you the true Bread out of heaven” (John 6:32); “I am come down from heaven . . . to do . . . the will of him that sent me” (John 6:38).
- (f) “And now send men to Joppa and fetch one Simon” (Acts 10:5); “Go with them, nothing doubting; for I have sent them” (Acts 10:20); “Cornelius . . . was warned . . . to send for you into his house” (Acts 10:22).
- (g) “Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away”; “so they, being sent forth by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia” (Acts 13:3-4).
- (h) “But thanks be to God, who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus, for he accepted indeed our exhortation; but, being very earnest, he went forth to you of his own accord” (2 Corinthians 8:16-18).
- (i) The mariners threw Jonah overboard (Jonah 1:15), but God also is said to have thrown him into the sea (2:3). The whale delivered Jonah (1:17 + 2:10), but God delivered him (2:6).
- (j) In Romans 9:22 Paul speaks of “vessels of wrath fit for destruction” and in 2 Timothy 2:21 he speaks of a person purging himself to be a vessel for honor.

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 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 the content of a message they did not originate, or is it because he did something to the hearers' hearts 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 exegesis is at a stalemate.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

In preparation for the proposed solution to this impasse, some observations prove helpful.

- (1) Assigning a good activity to both God and people parallels statements about the activity of Satan in Acts 5:3-4,

But Peter said, “*Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land? While it remained, was it not yours; 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 just lied to people, but to God.*”

A similar phenomenon occurs between 1 Corinthians 7:5 and James 1:14.

- (2) A person's activity is assigned to Satan (Matthew 16:23; Luke 22:4 = John 13:27).
- (3) The same activity is assigned to both God and Satan (2 Samuel 24:1 + 1 Chronicles 21:1; Job 1:6-2:3, 10 + 42:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12).
- (4) Satan is said to do good (2 Corinthians 12:7).
- (5) God is said to do evil (Deuteronomy 2:30; Judges 14:4; 1 Samuel 16:14; 18:10; 2 Samuel 12:11-12; Psalm 105:25; Isaiah 45:7; 2 Corinthians 7:7; 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12; Revelation 17:17).
- (6) Satan and God are said to undo each other's activity; God sows the seed Satan takes out; Satan takes captive, and God gives repentance (Matthew 13:19 = Mark 4:15 = Luke 8:12; 2 Timothy 2:24-26).
- (7) A bad thing is simply assigned to Satan (Luke 13:16; 2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 2:18; 1 Peter 5:8).
- (8) A person's turning away is also God's giving 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. The activity of a human person is credited to (a) its ultimate inspiring source or (b) to its permissive ratifier; surely people are not just pawns in the hands of supernatural contestants. A good example of crediting an act to its ultimate inspiring source is Philippians 2:13, “*For it is God that is working in you both to will and to do.*” Paul means evidently that God is, and should be, the motivating source of their high resolves so that their obedience does not depend on Paul's presence (contrast Augustine in *The City of God* 22:2).

Using the Satan statements as controls on the God statements, we may conclude that linguistic and theological mechanisms are employed in expressing a point other than perhaps the immediate impression an English reader may receive.

From a practical standpoint a principle is needed for transcending the deadlock between certain pairs of passages. The hermeneutical program is to select principles that do not produce interpretations that ultimately violate the self-consistency of God, that is, do not eventuate in the great dilemma: God's desire to save all men + his decision to save some + the fact of his self-consistency. This method does not guarantee correct understanding, but in principle it eliminates a class of incorrect ones. In the areas of anthropology and soteriology, it provides a method for working with texts often 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

The differences between occasional, material, formal, instrumental-efficient-moving cause, final cause, originating cause are not always kept in common parlance. Streamlining causal distinctions may be expected in scripture also. Biblical writers were men with strong God-consciousness, which accentuated the Semitic tendency to omit intermediate causes. Since the universe is God's universe, every event in it falls under his jurisdiction. Even the evil that exists is God's doing insofar as he is responsible for it. Much of Augustinian-Calvinistic anthropology exhibits a tendency to read causal statements as efficient causation. This practice is conjoined with, or produces, the further tendency to consider in terms of the category of nature those matters that are functional and relational, or at least to try to reduce them to the category of nature.

Passages exhibiting such streamlining of causes are sometimes taken to mean that men are unable to respond unaided to the influence exerted on them by the message, by circumstance, and by interpersonal relationships. John 6:37 says, "*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and those who comes to me I will in no wise cast out.*" Giving people to the Son does not eliminate their ability to come to the Son. The Father designed salvation to involve the coming of people to the Son; and the Son, working with the Father, accepts them. In the same chapter Jesus says that the *Father "gives you the true Bread out of heaven"* (6:32), even while he speaks of his coming "*down from heaven to do God's will*" (6:38). Jesus was delivered by God's determinate counsel and foreknowledge (Acts 2:23) even though he laid down his life of himself (John 10:11-18, etc.).

Causal distinction includes within it the difference between permissive and prescriptive will. Calvinism more customarily reads the will of God as prescriptive will. In place of permission-prescription as used here, Calvinism has necessity and compulsion, forced from the inside vs. forced from the outside. 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. E. M. B. Green comments that permission-prescription is not linguistically distinguished in Semitic dialects (*The Meaning of Salvation*, p. 13). The "raised

up” passages are a case in point. 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. Prescriptive and permissive matters are the same in that they are God’s active will, but they differ importantly in their essential originating cause: In the former the decision is initiated in the mind of God while in the latter the decision is initiated in the mind of some other being under God’s ratifying control. Divine glorification, purposefulness, and security come under both modes of divine will. Man’s action allowed by God may be called God’s action.

Perhaps another way of conceptualizing this matter of causal series is direct and indirect operation. People cannot come to the Son unless the Father draws them, but the drawing is through the proclaimed word they learn (John 6:44-45); and the “cannot” of their coming is circumstantial, not natural, a difference elaborated under the next main principle below. A ready illustration of indirectness is the ability of Hebrew idiom to speak of a man’s begetting a distant descendant; the correlative expression “son of” for a distant ancestor is the same thing in reverse. Paul persecuted Jesus (Acts 9:5; 22:8; 26:4)!

Romans 8:29 is commonly appealed to by non-Calvinists as an argument against Calvinistic predestination: (1) “*Whom he foreknew he predestined.*” The response poses a logically prior question: “*Foreknowledge of what?*” “*Foreknowledge of faith*” is the answer. A question is then asked: (2) “*How did the person get that faith?*” “*God gave it to the person*” is the Calvinist’s contention. But again, a prior question may be raised: (3) “*How did God give the person that faith?*” Paul’s own answer in the same letter is that faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (Romans 10:14, 17). This line of thought exemplifies the importance of separating elements in a causal series. Not every passage mentions everything involved in a topic.

In an omniscient viewpoint, the distinction between purpose and result tends to disappear as a consequence of the prescriptive-permissive application of causal series. This phenomenon appears in John 9:3, for instance, when Jesus explains that the blind man’s condition was so “the works of God should be made manifest in him.” The point seems to be that what had a permissive origin (as the outworking of natural causes) became an occasion (result) for God’s glorification through his Son’s miracle.

Related to the distinction between purpose and result 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). Ordination to eternal life was chronologically before, or from, the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4; Revelation 17:8), as was 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” (13:47) was in accordance with God’s prior intention announced in Isaiah 49:6. The passage is cited to justify offering the gospel to Gentiles when the Jews refused it (13:44-46), lest offering it to them only be seen as corroborative reason for Jews’ decision to disbelieve. Not only had God determined that Gentiles could come, but in anticipation of their coming, had ordained them to eternal life. Consequently, the writer indicates the propriety of turning to the Gentiles in the historical proclamation of the gospel. Ordination was to eternal life, not to the ability for faith; so the ordination correlates with faith rather than causes 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, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be; and they that are in the flesh cannot please God.*” “*The mind of the flesh*” is described in 8:6a as “death”; it stands for that system of thinking that does not go beyond the realm of the physical, the natural, and the temporal—that thinking which is “*separated from God.*” This system is antithetical to the “mind of the spirit” in 8:5b, for its outlook on “life” 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 stands contrary to God’s spiritual, supernatural, 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 whether people can change systems. People that are sinners cannot be pleasing to God, because even the good that they do comes from a circumstance of imperfection, enmity against God, which they cannot escape by the nature of the case. The mode of the inability, therefore, is circumstantial, not natural; the inability is due to the circumstance, not the people.¹

Earlier in Romans 3:12 Paul quotes Psalm 53:3 as saying, “*There is no one that does good, not even one.*” Doing good appears in the beginning of the section where Paul sets forth perfection as the requirement for fellowship with God. The apostle takes “good” to mean perfectly good as in the reply of Jesus 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 human 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; Matthew 12:34 is probably an example of tendential present, “*How can you, being evil, [try to] speak good?*”). Being once in a state of imperfection, they cannot do perfect goodness even though they may do good things.

According to John 6:44, no one can come to the Son unless the Father draws him. What is propounded here is not that a supernatural kind of influence must regenerate a degenerate capacity. Rather, the idea is that no one can come to Jesus except on the Father’s terms. Men cannot establish the kingdom of God according to their own designs.

After the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-14), 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 occurred 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 program—like their own; it also equals responding to the theocratic Son.

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 ideals. Whether they were able 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. The two programs being incompatible, they could not operate in the one while being committed to the other.

A cluster of images in the gospels centers around the concept that only good trees bring forth good fruit (Matthew 7:15-20; 12:33-37; Luke 6:43-45; cf. James 3:1-12). Calvinistic interpreters take such statements to mean that there is a correlation between nature and action.

The metaphors indicate, however, a correlation between inner action and outer action inasmuch as they condemn hypocrisy. The inner actions of how people intend, think, and feel express themselves outwardly, because outward behavior arises from inner motives. One person can often see another's invisible motives by attending carefully to the person's visible actions. Watching "fruit" suggests a long-term observation that detect the inconsistent living of studied hypocrisy when people try to cover up (Matthew 7:15) their real intentions by good talk (Matthew 12:34) and attempt to sever the necessary connection between inner attitude and outward behavior. It does not usually take long to "see through" people, because daily life issues from the unconscious self.

The word "create" signifies in its most basic sense 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, or being changed. God is the only one who ultimately can pronounce a person no longer guilty of a misdeed, for it is against God that people sin. The creation of a new heart is not a remaking of something marred, but a cleansing of it and a changing of its functioning and relationships. Creation in Christ is a change of relationship and a change of standing that result from a change in pronounced quality of holiness, not from a renewed faculty supplied to the sinner. People sometimes say, "He makes me mad." The picture is not one of passiveness, but of responsiveness. This is a matter of personal influence that moves another person to action, not a natural creativity. John 3:6 uses "born again" as a natural process to speak of a change of spiritual relationship oriented from above. What is, in fact, an action or a relationship 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; because 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 eternal life is open to Gentiles as well as to Jews on the condition of repentance, because God has made his repentance-unto-life possibility available to them as well as to Jews (Luke 23:47; Acts 5:31; cf. 2 Corinthians 7:10).

The intent is not that God needs to give Gentiles the ability to repent, but the opportunity to repent unto salvation. Repentance is not a gift received as distinguished from something done, but an opportunity given for repentance to have salvific 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 neuter, not feminine, and cannot refer to the feminine word "faith" as its grammatical antecedent. Instead, "that" points to the impersonal idea in the verb: salvation.

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 as a fact is only in reality a general rule (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 human beings do not receive the things of the Spirit of God because they

are foolishness to them; and they cannot know them because they are spiritually discerned.” First, the reader must understand what Paul means by “natural human being.” “Natural human being” does not mean “unregenerate human being” particularly, for the preceding context does not discuss people’s fallen nature, but the circumstance of people without a revelation of the mystery (1 Corinthians 2:7). A natural human being is one unaided by revelation from the supernatural through the Spirit. Paul makes a similar use of “nature” in Romans 2:14 as he speaks of people without revelation doing “by nature” the things of God; the origin of what they do is within their own educated conscience as it sometimes leads them in behavior that God wants, but which they have not been told about by special revelation.

Paul has a similar thing in mind in 1 Corinthians 2, because he is speaking of the mystery that had not been known in the world (2:7-9) and that had only recently been made known (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). Nobody would ever have thought that a dead man could be a means 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 the mind of God, they cannot know what God is planning (2:9-11) any more than one person can tell what another person 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 human beings are those who do not have access to supernatural thoughts, they cannot know them. The word *know* in the original is aorist and should be taken as an ingressive aorist, “come to know,” since the preceding material treats 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 thoughts of God are put in human language; things of spiritual origin are expressed in words that can carry spiritual content (1 Corinthians 2:13). Paul does not say that people cannot learn these things when God teaches them, but that they cannot come to know them without God’s teaching them through revelation; they cannot find them out any other way. Consequently, 1 Corinthians 2:14b is not speaking of the nature of human beings at all, but of the nature of their ignorance; they are dependent on revelation to come to a knowledge of the will of God. That revelation is by the Spirit, whose message Paul identified as what he was preaching. By philosophy, however, comes not salvation, but lostness, as he declares elsewhere in Romans 1.

In 1 Corinthians 2:14a Paul says that people accustomed to solving their problems with reason and wisdom as the ultimate court of appeals, do not as a rule welcome things not learned through wisdom. The idea is not logically derived and therefore not intellectually sophisticated. That this generalization is true need not be denied; there are few such philosophical people effectively called because they seek not to listen, but to discover for themselves that they may glory at the shrewdness of their discovery (1 Corinthians 1:26-27). It is more prestigious to discover than to be told, to be able to find out for oneself than to ask or be instructed. These kinds of people tend also to distrust the word of other people. Though they may not welcome or eagerly accept the testimony of others, they can do so and sometimes do so.

Allegorizing the comparison

“Dead through trespasses and sins” in Ephesians 2 is often allegorized into meaning “*insensible to spiritual matters.*” It is true that a corpse is insensible to its physical surroundings, but to compare lostness to death does not mean that every element associated with death is to be associated with lostness. A comparison requires a parallel only on specific connections. For example, one does not ask of the figure *“Christ paid the ransom”* to whom he paid it. That is not the reason for using the figure. Christ’s work and paying a ransom are alike in the respect that recipients are in a state of utter dependence and cannot bring about their own release.

In the same way in this passage, death means “*separation from God.*” To be “*dead*” to something is to lack cognizance of it; to be alive to something is to be “*with it.*” Lack of cognizance being the intent of comparison, Paul says nothing about the ability of cognizance. Conversely, to be dead to the world is to lack awareness of its allurements in any participational sense of knowing it, even as being dead to God means to lack awareness of his promptings in any participational, responsive, or obedient sense of knowing him.

SUMMARY

An exegetical impasse exists on passages that deal directly with anthropology. To dialogue with the Augustinian-Calvinistic concept of natural depravity, one must adopt the biblical-systematic approach, establish the points of the great dilemma biblically, infer natural ability systematically, and then re-examine the biblical bases and philosophical presuppositions of Calvinism.

The great dilemma implies a hermeneutical program whose direction is suggested by the observation that the Satan terminology for human activity parallels the God terminology Calvinism takes strictly. Among linguistic mechanisms relevant to these cases are the tendencies (1) to streamline causal distinctions; (2) to interchange nature, state, and actions terms; and (3) to state generalities as absolutes, which set up the danger of allegorizing the comparison during interpretation.

¹“Cannot” in English usually translates οὐ δύναμαι (*ou dynamai*, also οὐκ ἔστιν, *ouk estin*, as in Hebrews 9:5; οὐκ ἔχω, *ouk echō*, as in Hebrews 6:13; οὐκ ἴσχύω, *ouk ischynō*, as in Luke 20:26). That it does not mean natural inability should be obvious from a usage like John 5:19, 30, where Jesus is represented as not able to 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 [πῶς δύνασθε ὑμεῖς πιστεῦσαι, pōs dynasthe hymeis pisteusai]*?” it signifies the same circumstantial sense that, seeking the glory of people opposed to God, people are not able to believe unto receiving the glory of God. There is a logical incompatibility in the two programs of believing people and believing God. People must let go of the one to take hold of the other; whether they are able to let go and to take hold is a different question from whether they can take hold without first letting go. 1 John 3:9 clearly means circumstantial inability. To this class also belongs Jesus’ comment in John 15:5, “*Without me you can do nothing.*” People must abide in Jesus before what they do will have any significance attached to it; and if Jesus abides in them, they will be producing the fruit of that abiding, because they will be doing things they would not be doing without that influence. Interpersonal

influence is not such that people must move in the direction of the influence; neither does it apply in cases where the people could not do the desired act.