

## FOREKNOWLEDGE AND SIN

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God's reasons for creating us are summarized under divine self-fulfillment (delight), goodness (grace), glory and betterment. Of these four reasons the first and last are personal while the other two are interpersonal. The first two are the reasons for people; the third is the purpose of people beyond themselves. If we speak strictly about the purpose of people, we focus attention on God's goodness and on what grow out of it, particularly dominion and commission. Self-fulfillment highlights the unnecessitated satisfaction that moves persons to express themselves. Goodness roughly corresponds with God-to-man action; glory corresponds with man-to-God re-action. We say "roughly" because we cannot draw a sharp line between these aspects, which is exactly what we expect in the highly complex, reciprocating, transacting activity that interpersonal process involves.

With God, (a) outward-directed action gives fulfillment through self-expression in creation generally and in us particularly as those on whom he can more fully bestow his love. It leads to (b) the goodness of God in endowing us with capacities for more fully experiencing the goodness and beauty of everything God makes and does and with abilities that make us whom God can reveal himself to and call to mission. (c) The glory of God is more the indirect result than an intended purpose. Glory is an unnecessitated consequence that comes back to him through free-will praise and gratitude for the glorious grace of creation, sustenance, and redemption. God's love and holiness are more basic than his glory; his goodness in self-giving is more the concern than his glory from the response to it. God's delight in self-expression sets the category in which both goodness and glory take place.

God's self-glorification and foreknowledge. Although God's glory is more the result than the purpose of his creating us, self-glorification does have a place under God's purpose for humankind. For one reason, with all-knowing deity it is not possible to separate purpose and result entirely. With humans, results and purposes can be separate because results may come that we do not intend. Since we do not intend them, we do not know they are coming. That is especially the case when we interact with other persons, who can choose their response. The best we can have is relative certainty about how they will react. But with omniscient deity there can be only a distinction between modes of purposing. We can distinguish between one mode of purposing in which God initiates and another mode in which he lets others initiate. In allowing others to carry out their own intentions, God has made some kind of decision as to why he will not intervene to prevent or alter. What they purpose to do becomes, in effect, a mode of his own purposing; so, on the basis of his foreknowledge he ratifies, foreordains, predestines what they do under his sovereignty. In this sense, we can say that God purposefully predestines his own glory from our freewill praise, gratitude, and obedience. That self-glorification comes off more like delight.

God's self-glorification and our need to praise. Much of the satisfaction of a blessing comes in praising the one who gave it. Since God knows this, it is understandable, not only that his prophets would urge their fellows to glorify him, but he himself might command through them what in effect glorifies himself. That is what all his commands to worship him

amount to. But God did not command worship for his benefit so much as for the benefit that comes to the worshiper in offering the sacrifices, singing the hymns, observing the Lord's supper, praying, and giving.

God's self-glorification and our foreseen sin. The first issue under divine glory plus human sin is whether the (1) fact of evil is compatible with the existence of a (2) holy, (3) all-powerful God. Supposedly any two of these facts can be affirmed, but all three would create inconsistency: there is evil, and God is holy, but he is not powerful enough to stop evil. There is evil, and God is omnipotent, but he is not holy. God is holy and omnipotent, but evil is an illusion. We cannot enter into a full response to this standard "antilogism" that underlies philosophical atheism; but four factors set the framework for answering it as a background to dealing with the effect of evil on God's delight, goodness, and glory reasons for creating us.

Those four factors are time, free will, limitation, and redemption. **(a)** Time is important because a logical analysis is timeless, or a-temporal; logic simply puts concepts beside concepts and asks whether they fit together. Time provides the possibility of beginning and ending evil.

**(b)** Free will provides the mechanism that can begin evil.<sup>1</sup> Free will in secondary agencies (people and angels) provides for the beginning of evil outside of God; so God himself is not guilty for evil, because guilt lies at the point of choice. Although God is not guilty of doing sin, admittedly he is responsible for dealing with it, because he is responsible for his own choice to create what could choose to sin and for his own choice to let sin occur in his universe.

He meets that responsibility in part by putting **(c)** limitation on the extent to which evil persons can use their free will to oppose him. Their freedom is not absolute; it is limited in degree and extent. Degree limitations include the creatures' limited ability levels, sin's tendency to self-destruct because it usually runs counter to nature, divine revelation to let freewill agents know what God considers evil, and divine intervention along the way to stop what carries disobedience too far to fit with God's general purposes. Length limitations include the inability to remember the sense of pain (we can remember only the fact of it), the death of evil persons, and the consummation when God permanently removes evil from good, punishes evil appropriately, and judges persons sensitively by gathering up in judgment the inequities of opportunity during this life.

Finally, God meets his responsibility for evil by offering **(d)** redemption. The redemption possibility provides for freewill transformation of evil back into good before evil is finally overthrown. God created people despite his foreseen sin because at the same time he planned to redeem sinners—as many as would use that same will to turn back to him after experiencing sin.

A second issue under divine glory plus human sin is whether God knew we would sin. During conversations about God's omniscience, people may ask why he created us if he knew we would sin. The question implies that a holy, omniscient God would not do that. The inference is that God must not be holy and loving or that he must not know everything about the future, and the latter option is chosen.<sup>2</sup> But God goes ahead and blesses ahead of time those who he knows will later misuse his blessing. Jesus healed the leper in Mark 1:40-45

even though he knew the leper would disobey his injunction not to broadcast what happened (cp. Matthew 8:2-4; Luke 4:42-43). He chose Judas as an apostle even though Jesus knew he would later defect and betray him. Asking the question about omniscience amounts to raising the “antilogism” issue again since God’s ability to know everything is one aspect of his power to do everything. Denying omniscience at the expense of holiness and love is unnecessary for the reasons given above.

God did know people would sin. The fact that the Lamb was slain before the foundation of the world shows that God foreknew our disobedience (1 Peter 1:18-20; Revelation 13:8; cp. Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Acts 2:23; 4:28). He planned the solution before the problem arose. Scripture even says that he appointed individual people to the disobedience and condemnation (1 Peter 2:8; Jude 4; cp. Luke 22:22; Proverbs 16:4). We take it here that predestination logically follows foreknowledge as in the sequence of Romans 8:29-30. Foreordination consists of ratifying the actual fulfillment of foreseen intentions along with assigning to us individually the destinies he likewise established for us before time eternal.<sup>3</sup> At any rate, the predestination of the plan of redemption and the reprobation of those who reject it confirm the fact that God knew we would sin.

The third issue under divine glory plus human sin is positively why God created what he foreknew would sin.<sup>4</sup> Showing that evil does not eliminate God’s glory does not show that evil adds anything to it. It is one thing to demonstrate the consistency of having evil in a holy, omnipotent God’s universe; it is another thing to give reasons why a holy, omnipotent God would go ahead and create freewill agencies despite their foreseen sinning. The first effort neutralizes a negative; the second looks for a positive. By limitation and redemption, God preserves the balance between holiness and love in the face of evil; he preserves his “goodness reason” for creating people. Our concern now, however, lies with his “glory reason” in the face of evil. Even if nothing else could be said, creating us despite our foreseen sin corroborates our belief that self-glorification is a derivative result more than the primary purpose. Allowing the expression of evil shows that God is not self-centered even though he created us to his own glory. In fact, he shows the quality and degree of his “goodness” by balancing personal “delight” and “glory” with concern for other persons. His is an interpersonal goodness, not just a stoic goodness shown to impersonal reality.<sup>5</sup>

But positive things can be said also. **(a)** God created us despite our foreseen sin because freewill existence enhances our life quality. God preferred to bestow on us the greater life satisfaction that comes from freewill existence despite the accompanying “risk” that freeing others brings to one’s own freedom as well as theirs: others may take advantage of it, the giver, and each other. Once God opted for entering a freewill relationship, for consistency’s sake he would not turn around and disallow any actual use of that will contrary to his own. That would make impossible in practice what he made possible in capacity; for all practical purposes free will would not “exist.” In this connection, God’s greater gifts indicate his greater goodness and justify his greater glory, whether anyone recognizes it or not.

**(b)** God created us despite our foreseen sin because sin only accentuates God’s goodness and our recognition of it. By contrast, the ugliness of sin enhances the beauty of holiness. Actual evil is not necessary for defining good, because good can be defined in contrast to theoretical evil. Actual evil is useful for appreciating good. Evil is not necessary

for objective definition of good, but it is helpful for subjective appreciation of it. We can tie this observation back into the glory issue by saying that God is more glorified by a remnant who choose to repent from sin than he would have been by all who would have had no choice but to do his will. He is more greatly glorified by some of us who trust him out of free will than by all of us who could neither trust nor distrust him. The observation relates to the idea that one repentant sinner causes more rejoicing in heaven than ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance (Luke 15:7). Evil in our presence now not only increases our appreciation of God's goodness now and heightens our sense of dependence on him to his glory, but our enduring the evil of others now will be more than compensated by the glories that God will reveal later (Romans 8:18; Colossians 3:4; Titus 2:11-14; 1 Peter 1:3-7; 5:1), and we, who were also evil, will glorify him all the more for giving us "a second chance."

(c) God created us despite our foreseen sin because it would only establish a higher glory potential. Our sin does not thwart God's glory; it causes it to come about in a different way and in some respects at a higher level. It establishes a higher glory potential because redeeming back freewill deserters only highlights God's goodness and, therefore, his glory. Someone strong enough to deal with opposition either by grace or force is greater than someone who does not or cannot deal with it. But more than that, opposition only enhances God's goodness and glory by showing him greater in love. In allowing sin, he became still more "the God for others" because he became "the suffering God," yes even "the crucified God" (Romans 5:8).<sup>6</sup> God gives more than he gets. In self-glorification, God's goodness still predominates because he created us despite our foreseen sin. God's goodness predominates because he chose to give us the grace of existence, and the like, despite our failure to receive it with full appreciation and appropriate obedience.

(d) The presence of evil also establishes the occasion for righteous persons to develop virtues they would not otherwise have and to express care for others who suffer the effects of evil—all of which further redound to the glory of their God who does likewise.

Because of his power, God knew that by limitation he could handle the upcoming sin problem, and because of his holy love he knew he would handle it first by offering redemption. Our sin is not a comment on God's nature and character but the comment of each of us on ourselves; so our sin does not detract from God's glory. In fact, God knew that he could finally overthrow the majority who refused redemption, and that at the judgment before our final overthrow even the lost majority would confess his glory (Romans 14:11; Isaiah 45:23; cp. Philippians 2:9-11). God knew he could handle sin, knew how he could overcome it, knew that evil was illegitimate, and made it to self-destruct. So, in a sense the old adage applies, "*All's well that ends well.*" The fact of evil is consistent with a holy, loving, omnipotent, omniscient God who creates because of delight and goodness unto his own glory and human betterment.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Although we usually attribute the origin of evil to the capacity to choose, it more exactly belongs to the rational capacity, which "precedes" the volitional one (Justo L. González notes that Origen and Gregory of Nyssa both made this observation long ago: *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. I, p. 325). By formal manipulation, reason enables a person to imagine the opposite of, different from, or contrary of what is or ought to be. Will comes in then and chooses that other behavior.

<sup>2</sup>This “second” question may amount to a different framing of the first question about the antilogism between holiness, omnipotence, and evil. The ability to know all things is a species of the ability to do all things, if omniscience is thought of as an ability to know all things rather than the knowing of all things.

<sup>3</sup>For the viewpoint assumed here on foreknowledge and predestination, see *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 157-85.

<sup>4</sup>A little contemplation should cause us to see the inconsistency in saying that God should not have gone ahead and created people he foreknew would sin. Obviously, he would have had to create them before they would be in existence and commit sin. The proposition must be dealt with in the abstract rather than in the concrete—in the historical. God must have decided to create what had the possibility of turning against him and have done so with certain backup systems contemplated before he created freewill agents.

<sup>5</sup>There are subtle but far-reaching differences created by the Christian belief that ultimate reality—God—is interpersonal. Balancing personal delight with love for created persons illustrates the point. The importance of interpersonalism shows itself several times in our critique of traditional reasons for human existence. Plato, for example, in the *Timaeus* dialogue speaks of God’s goodness as a reason for creating the world, but for Plato “goodness” does not mean benevolence or love, but law, order, and harmony. See Benjamin Jowett’s translation of *The Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), Vol. II, p. 524.

<sup>6</sup>Note in this connection Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, in which he presents Christian hope as the flip side of divine suffering (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).