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

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Abstract

This concludes the treatment of Reformed defences of God's righteousness in ordaining the Fall begun in *Ecclesia Reformanda 2.2* (2010): 154-185. This conclusion focuses particularly on the evaluation of divine permission as a defence.

2. Divine Permission (continued)

Previously we expounded the Reformed view of divine permission. Our attention now shifts to evaluation.

2 B. Evaluation of Divine Permission

In any evaluation of permission an important caveat must be observed. We are analysing the usefulness of a concept, indeed a complex of ideas, rather than a word or collocation of words. There is certainly a place for weighing words and their value in communication, and indeed we will offer some tentative thoughts in our conclusion on the specific words deployed. However, an over-concentration on the words themselves can lead to false conclusions.

Frame notes the difficulty of finding a word which properly communicates all that we would want to affirm,[1] as well as offering examples of words communicating different connotations to different hearers.[2] Bavinck observes that because of its misuse by Pelagians, most of the Reformed have disliked the word 'permission', 'but they had so little objection to it per se that in fact they all again used it.'[3] More broadly, many terms in the *loci* of hamartiology and reprobation are unsatisfactory, but this is an inevitable feature of the finitude of human language.[4]

Unfortunately, it is this concern for particular verbal formulations that undermines some of Berkouwer's analysis of God's relationship to sin. He begins by establishing what he terms the 'biblical *a priori*.'[5] He defines this through the common witness of the Church that God is not the cause, source or author of sin.[6] Thus any formulation which compromises this should be rejected. It is unfortunate that Berkouwer has laid out such a universal prohibition, particularly when it is observed that 'the Church,' in the guise of many prominent theologians, has indeed affirmed that, in some senses, however unpalatable it sounds, God is the author of sin.[7] Further he argues that the Church has always rejected distinctions of causation.[8] It should be obvious from our survey of Reformed theology that this is not true. Thus, while we may all wish to deny, on some definitions, that God is the author of sin, we should not be led to reject *a priori* any use of language which may conclude, in one sense, and with appropriate distinctions that he is.

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[1] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (vol. 2 of *A Theology of Lordship*; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 174.

[2] Frame, *DG*, 175-8.

[3] Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (vol. 3 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2006), 61.

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

[5] G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (trans. Philip C. Holtrop; Studies in Dogmatics; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971), 27 (author's italics).

[6] Berkouwer, *Sin*, 27.

[7] Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (ed. Paul Ramsey; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 1; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957), 399.

[8] Berkouwer, *Sin*, 31, 47.

Calvin

Before proceeding to an evaluation, we must first analyse the place of Calvin in discussions of divine permission. It has become a commonplace of Reformed historiography that Calvin rejected permission,[9] and indeed that he is the only historic Reformed thinker to have done so.[10] However, it is not immediately clear that this is so. We have already noted that some of Calvin's denunciations of permission concern Erasmian formulations. Indeed, we are persuaded that, given the definition of permission here, Calvin would concur with the later Reformed tradition.

First we will analyse Calvin's negative statements about permission. Calvin was particularly concerned about any misrepresentation of God arising from the use of permission. In the case of the hardening of Pharaoh, he notes that permission is a 'useless' concept here.[11] However, his subsequent statements illumine his meaning. It is useless as if God only allowed it, rather than willing it.[12] Further, he opposes 'the permission of a quiescent God' [13] to the active judgement of the Lord. He disavows that God 'otiosely permits [evils]'[14] and concludes 'it is easy to conclude how foolish and frail is the support of divine justice afforded by the suggestion that evils come to be not by His will, but merely by His permission.'[15] Throughout this section then, Calvin is opposing a non-willed, passive, unmoving form of permission to God's active willing of evil as a form of judgement and hardening.

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[9] R. A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1985), 222. Muller, *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (vol. 3 of Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003), 471. Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross: Christian Thought and the problem of evil* (trans. David Preston; Leicester: IVP, 1994), 95.

[10] Muller, *Dictionary*, 222. In more recent times, Frame and Berkouwer have rejected permission.

[11] John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (trans. John K. S. Reid; London: James Clarke, 1961), 174.

[12] Calvin, *Predestination*, 174.

[13] Calvin, *Predestination*, 175.

[14] Calvin, *Predestination*, 176.

[15] Calvin, *Predestination*, 176.

In his *Commentaries on Genesis*, Calvin again criticises permission. Commenting on Genesis 45:8 he says

> Good men, who fear to expose the justice of God to the calumnies of the impious, resort to this distinction, that God *wills* some things, but *permits* others to be done. As if, truly, any degree of liberty of action, were he to cease from governing, would be left to men. If he had only *permitted* Joseph to be carried into Egypt, he had not *ordained* him to be the minister of deliverance. . . . Away, then, with that vain figment, that, by the *permission* of God only, and not by his *counsel* or *will,* those evils are committed which he afterwards turns to a good account.[16]

As before, the opposition Calvin notes is between will and permission. The picture of God ceasing from governing suggests a notion of self-limitation more common to later Arminian thought, an area from which God consciously withdraws and allows a liberty of indifference. This is far removed from the Reformed doctrine of permission already set out.

In Book 1 of the *Institutes* Calvin pronounces that the 'figment of bare permission vanishes'[17] when it is seen that God not only 'permits' Satan's trial of Job but is the author of it.[18] On the same subject he says that permission is 'too weak to stand.'[19] As he proceeds to the discussion of reprobation Calvin notes that some in this debate have recourse to a distinction between will and permission: 'By this they would maintain that the wicked perish because God permits it, not because he so wills.'[20] Here he specifically names Erasmus in his *De Libero Arbitrio* as an opponent.[21] Again, we note throughout these texts that Calvin is opposing the distinction between *will* and permission, whereas the Reformed distinction is within the *voluntas Dei* between '*voluntas efficiens*' and '*voluntas*

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[16] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis* (trans. John King; 1847; Calvin's Commentaries 1 ; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1984), 378 (author's italics).

[17] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols; LCC 20-21; Philadelphia,Pa.: The Westminster Press, 1960), I.xviii.1 (1:230).

[18] Calvin, *Inst.,* I.xviii.1 (1:229).

[19] Calvin, *Inst.,* II.iv.3 (1:311).

[20] Calvin, *Inst.,* III.xxiii.8 (2:956).

[21] Calvin, *Inst.,* III.xxiii.8 (2:956), fn. 19.

permittens.'[22] This is borne out by Blocher's interpretation:

> The Augustinian and Reformed tradition maintains that *in one sense* God 'wills' evil, he decides that evil shall occur. Calvin, though he at times uses it, objects to the term *permission*; he considers it too weak, suggesting a God who is a mere spectator. In reality, he declares, God goes so far as to *move the will* of those who do evil.[23]

We note also the derogatory language in which Calvin often dismisses permission – bare, merely, otiosely. As is consistent with Calvin's practice, the sharpest rhetoric is deployed against Rome and radicalism, not against others within the magisterial Reformation or some of the great medieval scholastic figures. It is at this point that Reid's more careful analysis comes to the fore. He suggests that while rejecting what would become Arminian formulations, Calvin does indeed allow the use of permission 'with carefully defined connotation:'[24] that it is indeed *willed* permission, not unwilled. Reid does in addition offer that 'sometimes he goes so far in limiting the admissible idea of permission as to disallow its use altogether.'[25]

Secondly, then, we must assess Calvin's positive use of the concept of permission. We have observed already his account of concurrence against Pighius[26] in which secondary agency plays a major role. In this context of secondary causation and in answer to the specific question whether God is the author of evils, Calvin answers, 'God is not made the author of evil deeds when he is said to lead the ungodly where he wills and to accomplish and execute his work through them, but rather we shall acknowledge that he is a wonderfully expert craftsman who can use even bad tools well.'[27] Thus Calvin affirms the role of distinct causes which the Reformed deploy in permission. Commenting on Genesis 50:20 Calvin demonstrates the Reformed concern to establish the asymmetry of

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[22] Muller, *Dictionary*, 331.

[23] Blocher, *Evil*, 95 (author's italics).

[24] John K. S. Reid, introduction to Calvin, *Predestination*, 28.

[25] Reid, "Introduction," 28.

[26] Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius* (ed. A. N. S. Lane; trans. G. I. Davies; Texts & Studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation Thought 2; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996), 38, 48-9.

[27] Calvin, *Bondage*, 40.

God's relation to good and evil and his metaphysical distance from the commission of sin:

> He skilfully distinguishes between the wicked counsels of men, and the admirable justice of God, by so ascribing the government of all things to God, as to preserve the divine administration free from contracting any stain from the vices of men. . . . Joseph was sold by the wicked consent of his brethren, and by the secret providence of God. Yet it was not a work common to both, in such a sense that God sanctioned anything connected with or relating to their wicked cupidity: because while they are contriving the destruction of their brother, God is effecting their deliverance from on high.[28]

It is to be expected that Calvin's response to the term 'permission' would be more negative. At his time of writing, permission was largely a Roman and Lutheran term, carrying very different connotations. The full-orbed Reformed version would be developed by Calvin's successors. The most 'Reformed' version of permission available to Calvin was that of Augustine, upon which Calvin comments favourably because Augustinian permission retains 'God's will [as] the highest and first cause of all things.'[29] When defined properly, even Calvin deploys the language of permission:

> So God in ordaining the fall of man had an end most just and right which holds the name of sin in abhorrence. Though I affirm that He ordained it so, I do not allow that He is properly the author of sin. . . . So He permitted it not unwillingly but willingly.[30]

In addition to efficacious willing and secondary causation, Calvin also agreed with the definition of evil as *privatio boni*.[31] Further, while he does not explicitly draw the efficient-deficient or formal-material distinction, the illustration of the general and his army observed earlier[32] moves in this direction.

We may conclude, then, that Calvin would not have opposed the developments made in later Reformed orthodoxy in the concept of permission. He may have had a more negative rhetorical attitude to

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[28] Calvin, *Genesis*, 487.

[29] Calvin, *Inst.*, I.xvi.8 (1:208).

[30] Calvin, *Predestination*, 123.

[31] Calvin, *Predestination*, 169.

[32] Calvin, *Predestination*, 180.

the word, but the concept expressed in it is a truly Calvinist one.

Evaluation

As in the preceding exposition, we will take each element of divine permission in turn to evaluate its usefulness in vindicating God's ordination of the Fall. Some of these evaluations will be brief due to obvious consistency within a Reformed framework.

1. Reformed

We will not evaluate the first element as it is simply a statement that there is a Reformed version of permission distinct from non-Reformed formulations.

2. Asymmetrical[33]

In one sense the assertion of asymmetry is an antecedent to, rather than a part of, divine permission. The purpose of permission in a Reformed framework is to provide an account of the asymmetry between God's relations to good and evil which is already presupposed. Is this presupposition therefore an accurate one?

The presupposition of asymmetry is founded upon a desire to integrate three biblical truths: nothing is beyond God's providence, meaning he ordains sin, including the primal sin of Adam, and yet God hates sin.[34] This assertion is vital, because without it an obvious syllogism presents itself, which contradicts the testimony of Scripture: 'If God wills sin, then it seems sin is agreeable to his will.'[35]

Biblically, there are many examples of God's ordination of sin. The *locus classicus* of Genesis 50:20 is often used in connection with permission.[36] It demonstrates God bringing good out of evil.

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[33] Numbering corresponds to that used in the exposition, the first element having been "Reformed."

[34] Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Contours of Christian Theology; Leicester: IVP, 1993), 164-5.

[35] Joseph Bellamy, 'The Wisdom of God in the Permission of Sin', in *The Works of Joseph Bellamy* (2 vols; Boston, Mass.: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1853), 2:32.

[36] Bellamy, "Wisdom," *passim.*

However, it becomes starker when combined with 45:8. 'So it was not you who sent me here, but God.'[37] This throws into clearer relief God's primary causation in Joseph's brothers' sin. *In this sense*, we may conclude God caused Joseph's brothers' sin. Yet, God's displeasure at this sin is still evident in Joseph's judgement that his brothers intended evil. 1 Chronicles 21:1 states that 'Satan . . . incited David to number Israel.' The same event is related in 2 Samuel 24:1 but here the interpretation is that 'the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and *he* incited David.'[38] Thus, Scripture is not embarrassed to ascribe the 'same' action[39] to God and Satan, indeed using identical forms of the same word for both agents.[40] Yet, again in this example, God's continuing hatred of David's sin is clear in the resulting plague on Israel.

Dogmatically, this assertion of asymmetry is essential to the Reformed framework. A non-willed permission obstructs God's control over sin.[41] Without this control, Bellamy paints a vivid nightmare:

> Nor could any thought be more shocking to a pious mind, than to conceive the Deity as unconcerned in human affairs; the devil ruling in the children of disobedience without control; and all things jumbling along in this wicked world, without the least prospect of any good end ever to be answered.[42]

However, if God's total control over good and evil were simply asserted symmetrically, this would also cause problems for Reformed theology. Because of the whole complex of Reformed soteriology[43] the merit for good actions is ascribed to God.

Since men by themselves are quite incapable of doing or effecting anything good, what is good in or from them is attributable to God alone and to the operation of His grace upon them. The actions of the

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[37] Genesis 45:8.

[38] my italics.

[39] Of course, as our previous article demonstrated it is not strictly the same action as the moral intention is different for God, Satan, and indeed David.

[40] Hiphil imperfect of tws.

[41] Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 60.

[42] Bellamy, "Wisdom," 8.

[43] Particularly original sin, total depravity and justification by grace through faith alone.

elect are therefore both proximately and remotely to be attributed to God.[44]

However, if the relationship is symmetrical, God would also receive the full blame for sin. 'But in the case of the reprobate, another factor enters in to assume the role of proximate cause of the actions done, namely their own wicked volition, while to God is assigned only the remote cause of what they do.'[45] So, an assertion of asymmetry is essential to the coherence of the Reformed framework and, more importantly, the sovereignty and righteousness of God.

3. Anti-preceptive

That God would will (in one sense) something that was against his will (in another sense) is often presented as an absurdity by Arminians. But this distinction (classically between decretive and preceptive[46]) is also attacked by Berkouwer. He attacks the tension in permission of willing and not willing together.[47] He concludes this combination towards the same object is an absurdity 'in God's single, univocal will.'[48] Three responses may be offered.

First, while God's will is simple, classical theism would not speak of univocality. Rather, the doctrine of the two wills speaks analogically, as does all language about God.[49] 'These "two wills," however, are not distinct as two separate things or faculties in God. Rather, these "two wills" arise from the fact that God does not always reveal the entirely [*sic*] of his counsels to human beings, but only reveals what is necessary for salvation.'[50] In God, of course there are not two wills, but his will as it appears to us in its different effects

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[44] Reid, "Introduction," 37.

[45] Reid, "Introduction," 37.

[46] Muller, *Dictionary*, 331.

[47] Berkouwer, *Sin*, 52.

[48] Berkouwer, *Sin*, 56.

[49] Alan J. Torrance, "Is Love the Essence of God?" in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 116.

[50] Muller, *Essence and Attributes*, 440.

presents these two aspects.[51]

Second, the two wills are not operating in the same way towards the same object. Rather, they function on different levels. 'The reason for this is that the one will of God has diverse objects in the finite order.'[52] The preceptive will considers objects in isolation in an absolute sense.[53] The decretive will however considers objects in the context of creation and God's final purpose.[54]

Third, the Reformed can deploy a *tu quoque* argument. Arminians also believe there are two wills in God, whereas the Reformed doctrine of the 'two wills' actually preserves the simplicity of God.[55] The two wills of an Arminian in this context are the will to resist sin and God's will to restrict himself such that man can enjoy liberty of indifference,[56] risking the commission of sin.

While the Reformed doctrine of the two wills may be unpalatable to many, it is entirely self-consistent such that it forms a valuable element in our answer. In divine permission, God preceptively willed that Adam should remain blameless and obedient, but decretively willed that Adam should fall.

4. Non-hindering

We have observed that Bellamy draws an analogy between God not hindering sin in Genesis and his initial permission of sin's entrance into the world.[57] However, there is an obvious difficulty with this analogy. Once man has suffered the vitiation of his nature in the Fall, it is clear that sin inevitably follows if God does not hinder. Indeed, this is most likely what is referred to in Muller's definition of '*voluntas permittens sive permissiva*.'[58] But, it is not at all obvious why sin should

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[51] Muller, *Essence and Attributes*, 441. For a fuller defence of the two wills see John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" in *Still Sovereign* (eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), 107-131.

[52] Muller, *Essence and Attributes*, 438.

[53] Piper, "Two Wills?", 126.

[54] Piper, "Two Wills?", 126.

[55] Muller, *Essence and Attributes*, 451.

[56] Piper, "Two Wills?", 124.

[57] Bellamy, "Wisdom," 11, 27.

[58] Muller, *Essence and Attributes*, 471.

follow on God not hindering in an unfallen Adam without a sinful inclination. We will return to this more fully in discussing divine withholding.

5. Deficient

The notion of deficiency has come under attack by Berkouwer. 'Certainly there is no *causa efficiens* in God. Nor, however, is there a *causa negativa*, *per accidens*, or a *causa deficiens*.'[59] Along with secondary causation it forms the scaffolding of permission. We shall examine each feature of deficiency in turn.

5.i. Material-formal distinction

Bavinck's distinction is certainly a helpful one. It demonstrates how everything that comes to pass in the world is decreed by God. Every action and event was determined by him in precise detail.[60] Yet he does not produce sin: 'only the creature *brings forth* evil.'[61] This is also a helpful distinction in highlighting what is the sinfulness of sin–the intention of evil in the performance of an action. However, this raises an obvious question which Bavinck anticipates: 'it places the formal aspect of the deed, the sinfulness in the sin, outside God's government.'[62] That is, God brings about all of the matter which comprises the deed, but that which constitutes it sinful, the intent, is not brought about by God. Bavinck's analogy with faith seems at first to complicate the matter. Materially, faith is from God, as he works it, but formally it is from man because it is man that believes.[63] However, in a Reformed soteriology, the moral responsibility for faith rests solely with God, as no merit for faith accrues to the believer.[64] By analogy, full moral responsibility for sin must also accrue to God. Bavinck counters by observing that sin and faith are so dissimilar that the correct analogy should be between sin and the good works which

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[59] Berkouwer, *Sin*, 54.

[60] Helm, *Providence*, 172. Edwards, *FoW*, 399.

[61] Blocher, *Evil*, 99 (author's italics).

[62] Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 62-3.

[63] Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 63.

[64] Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 63.

would have occurred under the covenant of works. In the covenant of works,

> That good, materially speaking, would have been totally the work of God; formally, however, human beings would be the subject of it, and for them it would have carried with it–not of itself but in virtue of the covenant of works–a claim to reward. Now, sin is no more situated outside God's providence than the good, on the ground that it formally has humanity, not God, as subject.[65]

This provides an example of how moral responsibility for an action can accrue to the formal rather than the material cause without any suggestion that the formal cause is beyond God's providential decree. However, it is still less than fully satisfactory. The formal cause in the good of the covenant of works is still a righteous intention. This is wholly consonant with God's providence. Conversely, the formal cause in Adam's Fall is unrighteous.

The material-formal distinction provides further evidence of God's moral distance from evil in ordaining the Fall, but it remains unsatisfactory as an account of a necessary metaphysical distance. The formal cause is not outside God's providence, therefore it is still directly under his ordination. It cannot be self-caused or spontaneous[66] as this is both incoherent and Arminian, therefore it is still 'God-caused' in some way.[67] The material-formal distinction alone, then, does not provide the necessary metaphysical distance. However, if evil is logically a negation or a deficiency, as will be argued below, then it is possible that it demands unique categories of metaphysical analysis.

5.ii. Privatio boni

Frame has attacked this definition of evil as 'a shadowy metaphysical category.'[68] Unfortunately,[69] his main attack is not focussed on the

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[65] Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 63.

[66] In the sense of uncaused or random. See C. Samuel Storms, *Tragedy in Eden: Original Sin in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), 216.

[67] Storms, *Tragedy*, 221.

[68] Frame, *DG*, 163.

Reformed use of this concept, but rather on the Thomist version of Gilson.[70] Thus he attacks the assumption of libertarian freedom,[71] the lack of distinction between choice and the resultant evil,[72] the limitation of God's ability to prevent corruption,[73] and the assertion that 'created things by nature tend to slip into nonbeing.'[74] None of these however are characteristic of the Augustinian-Reformed view. Frame does observe that there is a Reformed variant:

> God is the efficient cause of everything good, but only the 'effectually permissive cause of evil.' He 'merely permits' evil, because it 'has not true being at all.' But I don't see any real difference between effectual permission and efficient causation, and I don't know why God should be responsible for what he causes efficiently, but not for what he permits effectually.[75]

While this is a criticism of divine permission more generally, it does not address the Reformed understanding of *privatio boni*. This is not to make evil 'nonbeing,' but rather to assert it is a falling short. Blocher, affirming evil as *privatio boni*, is yet highly critical of those who deny its reality.[76] Its reality comes from its parasitic and privative nature, and the substantial pain which results from it. 'The fact that evil is vanity . . . and the lack of something good (*i.e.* privation) does not remove the weight of sin, for evil makes use of the substance of created goodness.'[77] Indeed, as it is not created, for all creation was originally good, nor uncreated, for only God is uncreated, logically it must be a negation: '"In the beginning" the notion of evil enters the

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[69] Both here and later with regard to secondary causation I suggest that John Frame has misunderstood or misrepresented the Reformed tradition. I venture this with great caution. As one of the foremost Reformed theologians of the 21st Century, Frame is far more familiar with the tradition than I am. I am reluctant to imply that his reading of the tradition is deficient, but I have been unable to read the tradition in the same way he has.

[70] Frame, *DG*, 163ff.

[71] Frame, *DG*, 166.

[72] Frame, *DG*, 166.

[73] Frame, *DG*, 166.

[74] Frame, *DG*, 167.

[75] Frame, *DG*, 166.

[76] Blocher, *Evil*, 13.

[77] Blocher, *Evil*, 87.

mind only as the logical negation of the *only* real good, as an abstraction; it applies to nothing in the creation, it is radically *alien* to both the strengths and weaknesses, all of them good, of the work of God.'[78] But Frame attacks the position precisely as asserting nonbeing.[79] This seems to us to be a misreading of the Reformed position. Certainly this is understandable. Heppe provides examples of the tradition denying that sin is a *res*.[80] However, this is not to be understood as a denial of its reality.

> To say that evil is a lack is not to say that it is non-existent, for then it would be literally *nothing*. Rather, the evil consequences of evil arise from what is essentially a defect, just as the stumbling and lack of mobility which may follow from blindness are real enough as effects, but they follow from a condition which is the *absence* of sightedness.[81]

But there does appear, however opaquely, to be an ontological difference between good and evil, and Frame does not accept this formulation. He insists that opposites should be understood as 'on the same ontological level.'[82] Yet it is not immediately obvious that this must be so. There is no basis for this parallel to be drawn given the *sui generis* nature of the relationship between creator and creature,[83] and the nature of evil.[84] Rather, given the unqualified goodness of creation, the burden of proof lies with those who would deny privation.

Certainly 'the idea of evil as a privation is obscure: how can a lack . . . bring about horrendous evils in the world?'[85] However, this is insufficient reason to reject it, that our minds struggle to grasp it. The strength of privation in divine permission is the different moral evaluation attaching to the remote and proximate agents. 'Because sin or moral evil is a privation, the only cause or author of a morally evil

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[78] Blocher, *Evil*, 98 (author's italics).

[79] Frame, *DG*, 166-7.

[80] Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (1861; rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer; trans. G. T. Thomson; London: Wakeman Great Reprints, 1950), 143.

[81] Helm, *Providence*, 168 (author's italics).

[82] Frame, *DG*, 166.

[83] Helm, *Providence*, 163.

[84] Blocher, *Evil*, 102.

[85] Helm, *Providence*, 171.

act is whoever is the *immediate* author of it.'[86]

5.iii. Divine withholding

We have already observed the main limitation upon the analogy between divine withholding in reprobation and the Fall. Reprobation, for supra- and infra-lapsarians, envisages man-as-fallen as its object. Thus God's withholding of grace, justified because he is under no obligation to bestow it,[87] will inevitably result in sin, because a sinful nature left to itself produces sin. However, God withholding grace from the unfallen Adam does not seem to necessitate his sin. While he was *posse peccare*, he was also *posse non peccare*, under no obligation to sin. Undoubtedly this increases his culpability and the horror of the Fall,[88] but it does not enlighten the means of the Fall. The consistent Reformed response at this point is that the first sin is, literally, a madness. Edwards suggests that Adam's rational will was self-deceived, an act of irrationality. Because reason was the dominant consideration in moral choice in Eden,[89] it is reason which must be perverted in order to enable sin.

> [Man] could not fall without having [his rational] judgement deceived, and being made to think that to be best for himself which was not so, and so having his rational will perverted: though he might sin without being deceived in his rational judgement of what was most lovely in itself, or without having his conscience deceived and blinded, might rationally know at the same time, that what he was about to do was hateful.[90]

A disjunction is introduced between Adam's sense of what is best in itself, and what is best for him, which should not exist in an ordered

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[86] Helm, *Providence*, 170 (my italics).

[87] Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison Jr; trans. George M. Giger; 3 vols; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), IV.xiv.7 (1:381).

[88] Calvin, *Predestination*, 122.

[89] Oliver D. Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards and the Metaphysics of Sin* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 31.

[90] Edwards, "Miscellany 436," in *The "Miscellanies," a–500* (ed. Thomas A. Schafer; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 13; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 485-6.

world. Adam sins, knowing he is choosing against what is best absolutely, deceived that what is not best for himself is best for himself.

Bavinck suggests 'in its origin . . . [sin] was a folly and an absurdity. It does not have an origin in the true sense of the word, only a beginning.'[91] Blocher argues

> that the mystery of evil is the one unique inscrutable mystery, as unique as evil itself, *sui generis*. Human reason is made to trace the connections in God's created order, and to weave harmonious patterns from them; to understand means to integrate. A rational solution to the problem of evil would necessarily imply that evil was an integral part of the harmony that came forth from God![92]

In many ways, this is a very attractive and persuasive argument. Evil and sin, by their very nature are, in some ways inexplicable. However, it also shows the limitations of divine withholding as an explanatory tool. It is true, but raises as many questions as it answers.

6. Efficacious

The main criticism of efficacious permission is that it is nonsensical. 'I don't see any real difference between effectual permission and efficient causation.'[93] But Frame's criticism is inevitable given his rejection of *privatio* and secondary causation.[94] It should be obvious from this study that without those two elements, permission as a Reformed term is meaningless. Efficacious permission certainly sounds oxymoronic, but it must not be understood independently of these other elements of permission. It is simply a statement that divine permission is part of God's providential control, not the delimitation by God of an area outside his control: 'God's permission of sin is no less efficacious than his ordination of good.'[95]

7. Remotely caused

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[91] Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation*, 69.

[92] Blocher, *Evil*, 102-3.

[93] Frame, *DG*, 166.

[94] Frame, *DG*, 176.

[95] Frame, *DG*, 177.

A number of objections have been made to the role played in this argument by secondary causation.

First, there is concern that the logic of causal relationships collapses into determinism or fatalism. 'For here the necessity of man's sin (in God's plan) is simply forged as a necessary link in a causal system.'[96] It should be obvious already from Calvin's qualifications[97] that this is not what the Reformed envisage. Berkouwer argues further that

> to draw this 'consequence' is to misconstrue the relation of the divine and human activity in a totally illegitimate way. It is to conceive of a monistic synthesis in which man's sin is logically or causally integrated within God's total blueprint for our world. Therefore the senseless is assigned a full sense within the holy structure of God's plan.[98]

Two responses may be given. First, the question of causation is not designed to ascribe sense or meaning to evil, but rather to ask in what way God ordains it because of a concern for his holiness. Secondly, Berkouwer's complaint of 'a monistic synthesis' implies 'a zero-sum game'[99] of moral responsibility. But the distinction in this argument is not simply primary-secondary, but rather divine primary–human secondary. These two causes are not operating at the same level: God 'does not share in the action at the level at which the action is sinful.'[100] Calvin recalls that Reformed compatibilism ensures there is no external compulsion in the operation of causes,[101] from which Blocher observes that 'this distinction [secondary causes] removes the spectre of fatalism, and prevents anyone from drawing any objection from the activity of his creatures against the sovereignty of the Creator.'[102] This is precisely because the two causes function on different levels.

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[96] Berkouwer, *Sin*, 47.

[97] Calvin, *Predestination*, 170. *Inst.*, I.xvi.8, (1:207).

[98] Berkouwer, *Sin*, 48.

[99] David P. Field, 'God, the author of sin?', online at <http://www.davidpfield.blogspot.com/2006/10/god-author-of-sin.html>. Last accessed 30 October 2006

[100] Field, "God, the author of sin?" n.p.

[101] Calvin, *Predestination*, 175.

[102] Blocher, *Evil*, 93.

> There is the supernatural order which belongs to the divine ordination of all things. But besides this, there is the natural order, which may also in certain aspects be called an order of contingency. It is within this natural order that proximate causes have their place, and it is here in the case of man that the idea of culpability applies.[103]

Finally Frame highlights that the gift of God-imaging creativity and freedom in man 'speaks not of our independence from divine causation, but of our participation in God's creativity.'[104]

Second, Frame himself, though, is unhappy with the use of secondary causes. He says that its use by Calvin, Van Til, Clark et al. is unpersuasive.[105] This is because he wants to say 'God's involvement with creation is in some senses always direct. . . . He operates in and with the secondary causes, as well as by them.'[106] Thus it is a Reformed error to 'suggest that God does not also work directly, in and with his creation.'[107] However, it does not seem to us that this is what the Reformed tradition expresses. Calvin is open to God working in a variety of ways, such that providence 'is the determinative principle of all things in such a way that sometimes it works through an intermediary, sometimes without an intermediary, sometimes contrary to every intermediary.'[108] Equally, operating in and with as well as by the secondary agent still means that God is not *committing* the *same* deed as the agent.

Third, Frame concludes concerning causation that 'the distinction between remote and proximate cause is also inadequate to answer the questions before us, however useful it may be in stating who is to blame for evil.'[109] Conversely, we consider that it is a very helpful distinction on two fronts.

First, as with moral intention, distinguishing causation highlights that what is in question is actually different actions.[110] We have observed a number of times Calvin's illustration of the righteous

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[103] Reid, "Introduction," 25.

[104] Frame, *DG*, 153.

[105] Frame, *DG*, 155.

[106] Frame, *DG*, 155.

[107] Frame, *DG*, 155.

[108] Calvin, *Inst.*, I.xvii.1 (1:210).

[109] Frame, *DG*, 179.

[110] Field, "God, the author of sin?" n.p.

general and his unrighteous soldiers.[111] He argues that the proximate cause is committing one deed while the remote cause commits another in the same event.[112] 'God's will is the cause of all things but the "mechanism" of that causation is different according to whether or not the actions are according to his revealed law.'[113]

Second, it enhances the demarcation of guilt. 'The intervention of this proximate cause on the one hand removes all guilt from God, and on the other hand leaves man with a liability which he cannot escape.'[114] The negative example supports this. Because God is the proximate, as well as remote, cause of good works in believers, the moral credit accrues to him, as the moral guilt of sin accrues to the proximate cause in sin, man.[115] 'God acts so far distinctly from [man], that no vice can attach itself to his providence, and that his decrees have no affinity with the crimes of men.'[116]

This second aspect is most clearly seen by a negative example, that of Jonathan Edwards' occasionalism. We have already set out Edwards' understanding of divine permission.[117] Edwards held to a form of occasionalism, that is 'the denial of the temporal persistence of created objects', and 'the notion that there are no mundane causes'.[118] For our purposes, it is the latter which is significant. Crisp[119] has proved Edwards' occasionalism beyond reasonable doubt,[120] most notably from *Miscellany 267* and *The Freedom of the Will*. Because Edwards denies secondary causation, Crisp concludes, 'God is the proximate, not just ultimate cause of sin, because no other being

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[111] Calvin, *Predestination*, 180.

[112] Calvin, *Predestination*, 181.

[113] David P. Field, *Rigide Calvinisme in a Softer Dresse: The Moderate Presbyterianism of John Howe, 1630-1705* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2004), 135.

[114] Reid, "Introduction," 19.

[115] Reid, "Introduction", 37.

[116] Calvin, *Genesis*, 379.

[117] pp. 32-3 above.

[118] Crisp, *Metaphysics*, 131.

[119] Oliver D. Crisp, "How Occasional was Edwards's Occasionalism?" in *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian* (ed. Paul Helm and Oliver D. Crisp; Aldershot: Ashgate 2003), 61-78.

[120] *pace* Sun Hyung Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

has causal power.'[121] The implications for divine permission are obvious: if God is both remote and proximate cause of sin, any attempt to vindicate his righteousness on the grounds of a metaphysical distance between God and sin vanishes, though a defence on the basis of moral distance is still open.[122]

The repercussions of Edwards' denial of secondary causation highlight the value of the distinction itself. It shows the different levels of divine and human operation in the world, the different actions performed by the divine and human agent in the 'same event', and thus how God can be causally, providentially in control without being morally culpable for sin.

Conclusion

Although reservations remain about some aspects of Reformed divine permission, it provides a largely successful account of God's metaphysical distance from the Fall. We must concede that obscurity persists in God's relationship to the formal cause and human malice in Adam's sin, but this is perhaps an expected obscurity given the privative nature of sin. This privative nature also is yet to be satisfactorily defined. But given the *sui generis* nature of evil, and particularly the primal sin, removed as it was from a vitiated nature, this unease is possibly insuperable.

Despite this, an anti-preceptive, deficient, efficacious and remotely caused divine permission is a powerful explanatory tool in vindicating God's metaphysical distance from the Fall of Adam.

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[121] Crisp, *Metaphysics*, 50.

[122] In class discussion (Reading Primary Historical Texts, Oak Hill College, September-December 2005), it was suggested that Crisp's criticism does not necessarily hold when Edwards' idealist ontology is taken into account. Thus, if all being and all agents are simply thoughts in the mind of God, the remote-proximate distinction is nonsensical anyway. Dr Crisp agreed that more analysis of this would be necessary. However, even if Edwards' occasionalism is successful in his system, in our more general Reformed context, without his idealism, the denial of secondary causation remains an insuperable problem for a metaphysical defence.

Conclusion and Further Research

God is just. Whatever this study's conclusion about specific arguments, the Bible allows only the conclusion God is just. How is he just, specifically in ordaining the Fall of Adam? The Reformed tradition has provided two complementary answers.

He is just because his holy intention in ordaining the entrance of sin into the world and the human race was different from Adam's intention in overthrowing God's preceptive command. A difference of purpose brings about a difference in manner, which in turn means the one event must be distinguished into two acts, which require different moral evaluations. God's purpose in ordaining the Fall was to display aspects of his character to his creation which could never have been seen without the presence of evil – mercy, grace, forgiveness, justice, wrath. This was primarily for the sake of his glory and secondarily for the happiness of the elect angels and humans. He enjoys a moral distance from sin.

God is also just because in his efficacious, deficient, remotely-caused permission he demonstrates an asymmetry in his relations to good and evil which provides a metaphysical distance between God and sin. This permission is to be understood so that sin and evil remain fully under his providential government.

This study conceded at the outset that not every question would be answered exhaustively. Thus we may commend further research. The unique nature of evil and continuing fallen natures even of believers make it likely that our answers before the eschaton never will be exhaustive. However, with due humility, the church should continue to pursue understanding. Therefore we may observe that the nature of evil as *privatio boni*, the relationship between the formal cause of sin and God's providence, and the interaction of primary and secondary causes, remain worthy of further attention.

In the absence of the final word, the case for these particular elements established here is sufficiently compelling that we may conclude that Reformed theology provides the most compelling defence yet of God's righteousness in ordaining the Fall. The case is imperfect, and we have observed some less essential elements we would wish to jettison already. However, while awaiting further light, the central features of this thesis may lead us to cry, '*O felix*

culpa! . . . The state of pardon and of renewal is one of greater worth or blessedness than a faultless original position.'[123]

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[123] Helm, *Providence,* 214.