

FIVE

God and His Creation

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Introduction

So far we have talked about revelation and God. The last several chapters were focused on God's being, character, attributes, and nature as the Trinity. In other words, we considered God as *God* or God in himself. But God did not choose to remain alone as Father, Son, and Spirit forever. In this chapter we consider the way God predetermined all aspects of the creation, brought the creation into existence, and then began to govern that creation as its supreme God and King. We begin with what Reformed theology calls his "decree."

God's Decree

God's "decree" has to do with his design and intention behind both the creation and the history of that creation. The Bible tells us that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph 1:11), and that, "from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom 11:36). In Isaiah 46:10 he says, "I will accomplish all my purpose." In Ephesians 1:5 we are told Christians are "predestined...according to the purpose of his will." In Luke 12:32,

Jesus says it is “your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” All of these ideas are getting at the way God’s design is what is actually happening in history and the creation. In Reformed theology, this is called God’s eternal decree. In the *Westminster Confession of Faith* God’s decree is defined in this way: “God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass” (*WCF* 3.1). In the *1689*, the authors made it even more clear that nothing outside of God himself determines or affects what he decrees: “God hath decreed *in himself*, from all eternity...whatsoever comes to pass” (*1689* 3.1; cf. *TCOF* 3.1).

It is significant that in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*,¹ the name of chapter 3 has “Decree” in the singular, underscoring that all the facets of God’s determination are really a single act. To make sense of things we sometimes speak of God’s “decrees” in the plural, but it is important to remember that God decreed everything in a moment “just as a genius all at once completely grasps the idea of a work of art.”²

In this determination of all that happens, we should note that “all things” means “*all* things.” In Ephesians 1:11 and Romans 11:36, both verses use the phrase “all things” (Grk., *ta panta*) and mean by it every single thing there is. Ephesians 1:11 says God “works all things according to the counsel of his will,” and Romans 11:36 says that “from him and through him and to him are all things.” Though we could cite hundreds of verses to demonstrate this idea, I will cite only a few to make the point.

God determines all the events in nature:

You visit the earth and water it; you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide their grain, for so you have prepared it.¹⁰ You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.

¹ As well as and *1689* 3.1 and *TCOF* 3.1.

² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, 2:374.

¹¹ You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with abundance. (Ps 65:9–11)

God determines seemingly chance events:

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD. (Prov 16:33)

God determines the largest event ever, the creation of the universe in Genesis 1–2, but also the smallest events we can identify:

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.” (Matt 10:29–30)

God determines the destinies of nations and all human history:

“He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.” (Acts 17:26)

God determines the details of a person’s life from their DNA and personality to the day of their conception and death:

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. ¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. (Ps 139:13–16)

God determines the sinful choices we make according to his own larger purposes:

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” (Gen 50:20)

We know this to be true, because the most sinful event to ever occur in human history was preordained fully by the living God:

This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. (Acts 2:23)

God determines who will be saved (election) and who will be condemned (reprobation):

So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,”⁸ and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet 2:7–10)

Once again, what God decrees is *everything*. In Reformed theology, there have been attempts made to parse out the order of the things decreed. This is not a chronological ordering but a logical ordering. As John Frame explains, it is an exercise in imagining God in the process of decreeing all things. What did he *logically* (not actually) imagine first? Was it that a people was created and then fallen, and so election was choosing a set of people already fallen? That is called *infralapsarianism*, since the decree to elect some is *after* (*infra-*) the decree to create and permit the fall. Or, did God imagine us first as his elect people, and then he decreed that we

would be created and afterwards fall? That is called *supralapsarianism*, since the decree to elect some was *before* (*supra-*) the decree to create and permit the fall.³ There are strong arguments for both positions, but it is the *infralapsarian* position that has found its way into the key Reformed confessions and catechisms. On this issue, I agree with Bavinck that the accent in God’s Word and the reality of the situation is that God ordains everything at once and so dividing it up only muddies the waters. He writes,

The counsel of God and the cosmic history that corresponds to it must not be pictured exclusively—as *infra-* and *supralapsarianism* did—as a single straight line describing relations only of before and after, cause and effect, means and end; instead, it should also be viewed as a systemic whole in which things occur side by side in coordinate relations and cooperate in the furthering of what always was, is, and will be the deepest ground of all existence: the glorification of God. Just as in any organism all the parts are interconnected and reciprocally determine each other, so the world as a whole is a masterpiece of divine art, in which all the parts are organically interconnected. And of that world, in all its dimensions, the counsel of God is the eternal design.

Herman Bavinck⁴

Predestination: Election and Reprobation

Since God decrees “all things,” this would include his predestination of all people, which means the way he determines our eternal destinies in advance, whether we will end up eternally

³ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 224–226.

⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, 2:392. See also Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 227.

blessed in the new heaven and new earth or eternally punished in hell. We need to unpack this a little bit, since it is such a significant topic. You can hear in the word itself something of what “predestination” means: “*pre-*” means before, and “*-destination*” is a place you arrive. Thus, the word tells us that God establishes *beforehand* the final *destination* of each person. Sometimes when “predestination” is used it refers to a more general pre-determining of an event (Acts 4:28). It can even be used in a narrow sense to refer only to Christians (Rom 8:29; Eph 1:5). Yet, we will use it to refer to both the elect and the non-elect. “Election,” then, refers to those predestined for salvation. “Reprobation” refers to those predestined for damnation.

Election

Election *refers to God in eternity past choosing some to be saved in Jesus Christ.* This active, personal, and salvific (saving) *choosing* is what is at the heart of the doctrine of “election.” It is a choice based entirely on his own good pleasure and nothing either good or bad in us. You can hear this in Ephesians 1:4–5, “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us...according to the purpose [or “good pleasure,” *eudokia*] of his will.” Romans 9:11–12 says something similar as it discusses election with God’s choice of Jacob and not Esau, “Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’”

A word related to “election” is “foreknowledge.” This word sounds like it means merely a “knowing before,” and, of course, God does know beforehand everything that will happen. His knowledge includes this exhaustive *fore-knowledge* of all things. And yet, “foreknowledge” as it gets applied to God’s people clearly means something more. Romans 8:29 is clear evidence of this, since only those “foreknown” are “predestined” to be “called” and

“glorified” (Rom 8:29–30). Bavinck defines “foreknowledge” in this way: “‘Foreknowledge’ pertains to the persons who in this elective purpose of God are the object, not of God’s bare foreknowledge, but of his active delight.”⁵ It is more than *fore-knowing*; it is “fore-loving” in a saving manner.

Reprobation

Reprobation is the sobering truth that God chooses some to remain in their sin and to inherit the just condemnation for their sin. Since we are all born condemned and sinful in our disposition, God does not need to actively intervene to condemn us. He needs merely to pass over us with his saving grace. This is an active decision on his part, but it is a decision not to intervene. With “election,” he is deciding to intervene and must actively extend his grace if we are to respond to his offer of salvation in Christ.

Note here that with reprobation, there is no injustice in what God is doing. Treating people as they *deserve* is not unjust.⁶ The fact Christians receive mercy instead of justice—though his mercy is “just” because Christ received our punishment, Rom 3:26—does not make God unjust. It makes God *God*. We are the clay, and he is the potter. The potter does with the clay what he chooses to do (Rom 9:19–21). If I give money to one beggar but not another, I have been generous to one beggar. But I have not been *unjust* to the second beggar simply because I did not have enough money to give to both. God extends mercy to his people and he gives due punishment to those who are not his people. He gives *injustice* to no one.

Why does God do what he does, both in saving some and condemning others? The Bible reveals to us the highest and best motivation for God doing all that he does: *his glory*. In Romans 9 when Paul walks us through God choosing some but not others, he gets to this “why?” question. His answer is the glory of God: “What

⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, 2:345.

⁶ On this see R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Elevate, 1994), 120–21.

if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?” (Rom 9:22–24). Notice that God desires to “show his wrath and to make known his power,” and “to make known the riches of his glory.” He chooses some for salvation and some for judgment “to show” to the universe who he is, to shine forth his glory for all to acknowledge and to be the object of worship for all eternity.

But it is the election of God’s people and the world created for them which in some ways is God’s higher aim. He is the sun and moon of the new heaven and new earth, his people will surround him and be with him forever, and this is the future redemption that the creation itself is longing (Rev 21:22–22:5; Rom 8:19–25). In the words of Herman Bavinck, “Creation and fall, preservation and governance, sin and grace, Adam and Christ—all contribute, each in his or her own way, to the construction of this divine edifice, and this building itself is built to the honor and glorification of God.”⁷

God’s Creation

Now we go from God *predetermining* all things to bringing all things into existence. This is the topic of origins, where all things came from. As Bavinck reminds us, it is God and not science that has the answers when it comes to origins:

The question as to the origin of things, of man and animal and plant, and of the whole world, is an old question, but it always remains an appropriate one. Science can supply no answer to it. Science is itself a creature and a product of time. It takes its position on the basis of things as they are made and assumes

⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, 2:405.

the existence of the things it investigates; from the nature of the case, therefore, science cannot go back to the time when things were not yet. Science cannot penetrate to the moment when they were given reality.

Herman Bavinck⁸

Creation proper

The Bible begins with the story of creation in Genesis 1–2, expressing in clear, historical, almost matter-of-fact language the very profound and consequential idea that *God created everything*. This truth reverberates throughout the Bible in passage after passage as God is declared to be the true God because he is the one who “made heaven and earth” (Exod 20:11; 31:17; 2 Kgs 19:15; 2 Chr 2:12; Pss 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 146:6; Isa 37:16; Rev 14:7). Often the accent is on the way he *spoke* all things into existence:

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (Heb 11:3)

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. (Ps 33:6)

So, the basic picture we get from Genesis 1–2 and the rest of the Bible is that God made everything, he did it by his Word, and it was *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”). The accent, then, is not on any process of creation and certainly not of creation evolving into the form in which we find it, but of a direct creation which he sovereignly accomplished.

But there are three issues within Genesis 1–2 I will address in more detail: (1) what actually occurred in Genesis 1:1–2; (2) the

⁸ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 164.

six days of creation in Genesis 1; and (3) the relationship of Genesis 1:1–2:3 and 2:4–25.

What Actually Occurred in Genesis 1:1–2

There are different ways to describe what actually occurred in Genesis 1:1–2, but three are common. The first view says that verse 1 is a temporal clause subordinate to verse 3, as in the NRSV: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, ‘Let there be light.’” Taken this way, there is no statement being made about the source of “the earth,” as it is merely there at the time God “said” in verse 3. Wenham says a majority of recent commentators reject this translation because of the opening, “in the beginning” (בְּרֵאשִׁית), which implies an “absolute beginning” and not simply an adverbial clause.⁹ A second view says that verse 1 is a title to all of 1:2–3. Read this way, verse 1 tells us what 1:2–2:3 is about: “Creation is a matter of organizing chaos.”¹⁰ But Wenham observes that if this is correct, there is a contradiction between verse 1 and verse 2, since verse 1 says God created “the earth” but verse 2 (in this view) says that “the earth” already existed.¹¹

The third view and the one I defend is that in verse 1, God created *everything* (just as it says), in verse 2 Moses describes what God just created, and then verse 3 begins the process of taking what was described in verse 2 and giving it form, fullness, and light.¹² This view helps explain what verse 2 contributes to the creation account. What is created is “without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep,” and this sets up the work God does

⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 12.

¹⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 12.

¹¹ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 13.

¹² This is the view defended in the following: Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 13; Vern S. Poythress, “Genesis 1:1 Is the First Event, Not a Summary,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 79.1 (2017): 97–121; Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time: The Flow of Biblical History* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 1972), 34.

in Genesis 1:3–31. He adds form to what is “without form,” fullness to what is “void,” and light to the “darkness.” Some who argue along these lines see a “gap” between verse 1 and verse 2 that could have lasted for thousands or even millions of years. This is how they account for the appearance of the age of the universe. I am not arguing for this at all. I see all of Genesis 1:1–5 as occurring on “the first day” of creation.

The Six Days of Creation—Six 24-Hour Days Filled with Miracles

The way Moses describes the six days of creation in Genesis 1:3–31 is poetic, majestic, theological, and awe-inspiring. The days of creation seem to fall into two groupings, days 1–3 and days 4–6. Days 1–3 present something like kingdoms which are then filled with the kings on days 4–6. This “kingdoms” and “kings” language is borrowed from Meredith Kline but I am not affirming his “Framework View” of creation (discussed below). The “kingdom”/“king” parallels can be seen on the respective days. On day 1 the kingdom of light and dark is created, and on day 4 the sun and moon are created to “rule the day” and “rule the night” (Gen 1:16). Notice that with day 1, “there was light” when God spoke, but what he actually does is “separate the light from the darkness” (1:4). Form is thus being given to what was “without form” (Gen 1:2). On day 2 the kingdom of waters above (sky) and below (oceans) are created (1:6–8), and on day 5 the kings of birds and fish are created (1:20–23). Once again, the waters above and below are not so much created *ex nihilo* as “separated” from one another to create “form” of the “without form.” Yet, day 5 is also a case of filling what was previously “void” (v. 2) in the waters above and below. On day 3 the kingdom of land is created (1:11–13) and then on day 6 the land is filled with “living creatures.” Then God creates the vice-regent over all the creation, mankind (1:26–28). Man is formally given “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over

every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (1:27). With the kingdoms and kings being made, and that which was formless, void, and dark being given form, fullness, and light, “God saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good” (1:31). Man is called a vice-regent because it is God alone who is King of kings. Certain creatures and parts of the creation are under the “dominion” of man, but “the heavens and the earth” (1:1) in their entirety are under God’s sovereign rule.

I am interpreting the six days of creation as six 24-hour days. The significance here is not whether they are 24-hour days instead of 22-hour or 35-hour days. The point is that the days are “normal solar days”¹³ The Hebrew for “day” throughout Genesis 1–2 is *yōm*. Many claim that it often means something other than a “normal solar day.” There is *some* truth to this, but the examples given as evidence are often not very strong. Authors will point to “the day of God’s wrath” (Job 20:28) or “the day of adversity” (Prov 24:10) or “the day of the LORD” (Isa 2:12) or “the day of prosperity” and “the day of adversity” (Eccl 7:14). Yet, these examples can all be referring to a single and typical “day.” The fact that such a “day” might have lasting consequences that last for many days or years (e.g., “the day of the LORD”) does not take away from the fact that what is being described will happen on a particular “day.” The same is true if I speak of “the minute I arrive” or “the hour of my rescue” or “the second I turn 16.” The fact that these events will have consequences that last longer than a minute or hour or second does not take away from the fact that they occurred at a particular minute or hour or second. Perhaps there is *some* evidence in Genesis 2:4, which speaks of “the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.” But a figurative use of “day” here is easy to interpret as such in the context of 2:4–25. And as with “the day of the LORD” above, the emphasis on “the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens” is on the particular day when he

¹³ Douglas F. Kelly, *Creation and Change: Genesis 1.1–2.4 in Light of Changing Scientific Paradigms*, 2nd ed. (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2017), 151.

made man and woman (day 6). In the six days of creation you also have numbered days (“the first day....the second day....the third day”) and references to “evening” and “morning” (1:5, 8, 13, 19, 31), details that underscore the reference being to a “normal solar day” and not to an unspecified span of time. There is simply no clear biblical example where “day” means something like a “vast span of unspecified” time, especially one enduring for tens of thousands or millions of years.

There is more to say. Two other texts need to be considered here, Exodus 20:11 and 31:16–17. These are especially relevant, because they are written by Moses himself (who wrote Genesis 1–2) and *they refer to the creation narrative*. They are in essence Moses’s interpretation of the creation narrative. He writes in the Decalogue that we are to keep the Sabbath, “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exod 20:11). And in another passage communicating the same idea, he writes, “The people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever.¹⁷ It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed” (Exod 31:16-17). This is quite a statement to support both a *young earth* and *normal solar days* in Genesis 1. The case gets stronger as we consider what God expects his people to do with the idea of the Sabbath pattern. He expects us to build our lives around a 7-day cycle of six days of work and one day of rest. When his people reject this pattern in the Old Testament, he rebukes them and disciplines them—sometimes violently (Exod 16:28; Num 15:32–36; Neh 13:15–22). He likewise makes great promises of blessing if they keep his Sabbath (Isa 58:13–14). In the New Testament we see an emphasis on “the Lord’s Day” as a day of gathering as the people of God for corporate worship (Rev 1:10; cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). The point here is that we are to build our lives around a weekly rhythm of seven literal days—not seven unspecified periods of time.

And, according to Moses who also wrote Genesis 1–2, this pattern is to be honored because “in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day” (Exod 20:11).

Two Other Views on the Six Days of Creation

Hugh Ross¹⁴ and others have defended what is called the “day-age view” of Genesis 1, which says that the days of creation are in fact ages of an unspecified but very long period of time. Ross looks at various models (expansion of the universe, visible starlight and other astronomical measures, ice layers, coral reef layers) that attempt to determine the age of the universe and says they average “13.79 billion years (± 0.06 billion years).”¹⁵ These numbers he can square with his “day-age” approach to Genesis 1 through a great deal of exegetical maneuvering. Wayne Grudem affirms his position as well.¹⁶ One of the ideas that most energizes this view is what is called “the appearance of age,” which simply means that the universe *appears* to be quite old. It “appears” old based on the observations and determinations of modern science, observations of course based on the fact that God *did not* create the universe. Ross believes the findings of science are to be relied upon, and to reject such findings is to call God a liar.

John Frame has a helpful response to Hugh Ross’s interpretation.¹⁷ He argues that the meaning of “day” simply does not ever do what needs to be done for a “day” of millions of years to be accomplished. It cannot be stretched to accommodate such an idea. Hugh Ross points to gaps in biblical genealogies to extend the timelines in the Bible, but at best this gains extra years or centuries, certainly not millions or billions of years. Hugh Ross has said it

¹⁴ Hugh Ross, *A Matter of Days: Resolving a Creation Controversy* (Covina, CA: RTB, 2015).

¹⁵ Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 147.

¹⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 395–402.

¹⁷ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 200.

makes God a liar if the creation account says one thing (six days) but the findings of science say another (billions of years). Yet, Frame says that those who accuse God of “lying” if the universe is actually young, are wrong since “God has never told us that the methods that scientists use to calculate the age of the stars are absolutely and universally valid.”¹⁸

To me, another of the great problems with these “appearance of age” arguments, is that they forget how recent and changeable our determinations of age actually are. Science changes its mind on significant matters every generation or two. To act as if there is now settled agreement on anything scientific (e.g., climate change) seems naïve. Frame makes a good observation here. The findings of science are based on the presuppositions of science. Science rejects the involvement of a creator God, and its findings are built on top of that presupposition. As Christians we know God did create the universe. Would not the findings of science change if they acknowledged what is actually true?¹⁹ Finally, Frame adds that “anyone who admits to any special creations at all must grant in general the reality of apparent age.”²⁰ If someone admits that Adam was specially created at any point (as Hugh Ross does), they are admitting to “the reality of apparent age.”

Another view on the six days of creation is called “the framework view,” which sees Genesis 1 as laid out in a poetic and stylized manner that gives a “literary framework” for the creation but not a literal and historical account of the creation. Meredith Kline is perhaps the most famous defender of this view, and he sees in days 1–3 God creating the “creation kingdoms,” and then in days 4–6 creating the “Creature kings.”²¹ The six days then lead to the seventh day of creation: “The rising chain of command does not stop at the sixth day; it ascends to the seventh day, to the supreme

¹⁸ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 200.

¹⁹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 200.

²⁰ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 200.

²¹ Meredith G. Kline and Lee Irons, “The Framework View,” in *The Genesis Debate* (Mission Viejo, CA: Crux, 2001), 224–225.

dominion of the Creator enthroned in His royal Sabbath rest.”²² An unfortunate aspect of this view is that it also rejects a literal 24-hour view of the six days of creation. This is unfortunate, because many of the insights found in the framework view are very useful and easy to include in a literal 24-hour view. As an example, it seems reasonable and right to see a kingdoms/kings pattern in the six days of creation. The sun and moon being created to “rule the day” and “rule the night” (Gen 1:16) points to a kingly role, especially as the days ascend toward the creation of man who is given “dominion” (Gen 1:26). But man is only a vice-regent, since God is the sole Governor of the universe he created.

Yet, advocates of the framework view add other elements to the view that are not acceptable if you hold to a 24-hour day view. One is that there must be continuity between Genesis 1 and 2 in terms of the typical providence of agriculture. Support for this idea is found in Genesis 2:5–6. Advocates argue that plants typically grow and multiply over long periods of time, and this must also be true of the abundant plant life present at the end of day three (Gen 1:12). And thus, what we call day 3 must have taken longer than 24-hours and there must have been a sun and rain as those plants were developing. They reject what they call “extraordinary providence” in the six days of creation and affirm what they call “ordinary providence.”²³

The framework theorists are not rejecting God’s creative activity in Genesis 1–2, only that Genesis 1–2 give us a *historical* account of this activity. Instead, they claim that what is given is really a *theological* account of the creation that makes no claim on the age of the universe or the length of time God’s creation took. It is agnostic on these issues.²⁴ I would argue that it is theological and poetic *but also historical*—just like all historical narrative in the Bible (Exodus, Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, etc.).

²² Kline and Irons, “The Framework View,” 225.

²³ Kline and Irons, “The Framework View,” 229. See also the article Meredith G. Kline, “Because It Had Not Rained,” *WTJ* 20.2 (1958): 146–57.

²⁴ Kline and Irons, “The Framework View,” 217–18.

John Currid responds to the framework view in his commentary on Genesis.²⁵ While he appreciates that this view allows for an easy alliance between secular science and the Bible, he ultimately rejects the view for several reasons. *First*, the verb form most common in Hebrew historical narrative is vav-consecutive-plus-imperfect, which is how events are described “in a historical sequence.”²⁶ This verb form is almost non-existent in Hebrew poetry but is everywhere in the histories. In Genesis 1, it is found 51 times: “If the text was not meant to be taken sequentially, why did the biblical writer employ this narrative device so freely?”²⁷ *Secondly*, “Genesis 1 contains little or no indication of figurative language. There are no tropes, symbolism, or metaphors.”²⁸ *Thirdly*, “the most basic common feature of biblical Hebrew poetry is line parallelism,” entirely absent in Genesis 1–2—though 1:27 *may* be an example of parallelism, clearly not enough to establish that both chapters are poetry.²⁹ *Fourthly*, the repetition in the passage does not qualify it as poetry any more than the *toledot* repetition throughout Genesis does (see below on *toledot*).³⁰ *Fifthly*, places like Exodus 20:8–11 and Psalm 104 echo Genesis 1–2 in a way that reinforces the historicity of it.³¹ We could add many more Scriptures to this list, such as Matthew 19:4–6. *Sixthly*, the numbered days clearly give the impression of sequence and not a framework.³² He then concludes by saying, “In the final analysis, the framework construction may be a bit too clever.”³³ I believe Currid is right on this.

²⁵ John D. Currid, *Genesis Volume 1 (Gen 1:1–25:18)*, EP Study Commentary (Leyland, England: Evangelical Press, 2015).

²⁶ Currid, *Genesis Vol 1*, 36.

²⁷ Currid, *Genesis Vol 1*, 36.

²⁸ Currid, *Genesis Vol 1*, 36–37.

²⁹ Currid, *Genesis Vol 1*, 37.

³⁰ Currid, *Genesis Vol 1*, 37.

³¹ Currid, *Genesis Vol 1*, 38.

³² Currid, *Genesis Vol 1*, 39.

³³ Currid, *Genesis Vol 1*, 39.

How Genesis 1:1–2:3 and 2:4–25 Fit Together

It is imperative to think rightly about how Genesis 1:1–2:3 and 2:4–25 relate to one another. It is common to dismiss the two narratives as being contradictory and perhaps even coming from two sources or authors and placed clumsily in Genesis. But this misses the clues given to us by Moses about how to interpret these.

The first account (1:1–2:3) is the creation of *everything*, and so we see man in the context of the whole of creation with man as the head of the creation and then God as the head of man and all things. But in the second account (2:4–25), man is the focal point in *the beginning of the story of redemption*. The first account gives us the creation of the entire universe, but the second focuses on one particular Garden in one particular part of the earth, Eden. Chronologically, the second account takes place on the sixth day of creation and is simply giving more detail about the unique creation of man. Given that 1:28 is a word spoken to the couple, and 1:31 is a statement about all of creation, it would seem that 2:7–25 (the creation of Adam and Eve) plausibly takes place between 1:27 and 1:28. God speaks the, “Let us make man” word in 1:26–27, creates man according to what is written in 2:7–25, and then speaks the blessing to the couple in 1:28. Only then is the great benediction spoken, “God saw that it was very good” (1:31).

Another detail not to miss is the way 2:4–25 is introduced with the phrase, “These are the generations of” (2:4). This is called the *toledot* formula, which is a device used throughout Genesis to divide the narrative into the equivalent of book chapters. We see it in 2:4 (the generations of the heavens and the earth); 5:1 (the generations of Adam); 6:9 (of Noah); 10:1 (of the sons of Noah); 11:10 (of Shem); 11:27 (of Terah); 25:12 (of Ishmael); 25:19 (of Isaac); 36:1, 9 (of Esau); 37:2 (of Jacob). With this formula we know we are entering a new part of the storyline and we are given the focal point of the next section. *This means that 2:4 is tied to the rest of the Genesis narrative in a tight and uninterrupted fashion.* 1:1–2:3 is then a prologue for the whole book of Genesis, and 2:4–

25 begins the first part of the unfolding story of redemption which continues for the rest of Genesis.

But because 1:1–2:3 is a prologue for the story of redemption in Genesis, it is really *a prologue for the whole of the Bible*. It provides the foundational understanding of how God, the creation, and humanity are related. The theology of God, creation, and humanity we are given in this opening section are meant to inform everything else we read from Genesis to Revelation, from the creation to the new creation.

The Creation of Man

We will say more in a later chapter, but here we want to see that man is created as the highpoint of the creation. He is a *creature* and so one of many in that sense. And yet, he is a creature set apart in distinct ways from all the other creatures and from every other thing within the creation. He *alone* is made in God’s image, and he *alone* is given a dominion that reflects something of God’s own dominion (Gen 1:26–28). The sun and moon “rule” the day and night, respectively, but this is a metaphorical dominion (Gen 1:16–18), since they make no decisions or judgments with respect to the lights of the day and night. In contrast to this, man is given a “dominion” that will require his full engagement of mind, body, and soul in exercising that dominion. A further clue that man is the pinnacle of the creation is that nothing else is created after man. With man (as man and woman), the creation is complete and *then* can be spoken the divine stamp of approval: “It was very good” (Gen 1:31).

The Spiritual Realm

Since all things were made by God (Col 1:16), this must include angels and demons and even the devil himself. This reminds us that God and the devil are not locked in a cosmic boxing match between two equal powers where the outcome is unclear. No, the devil is a creature among all God's other creatures and acts according to the will of God just like all other creatures. You can see this in Job where Satan is allowed to do *only what God allows him to do and nothing more* (Job 1:12; 2:6). And at the end of the story of redemption, God without any effort whatsoever and at just the moment he desires will throw the devil into the lake of fire to be "tormented day and night forever and ever" (Rev 20:10).

The spiritual realm in some places is referred to in a way that indicates some variety and hierarchy but without giving us any details. The Bible refers to "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph 3:10); "thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities" made by Christ (Col 1:16); "angels, authorities, and powers" who were "subjected to him" (1 Pet 3:22). No precise organization is shown to us, but these passages point to some kind of militaristic divisions.

Angels are also created by God (Ps 148:2–5; Col 1:16), and this include the sword-carrying cherubim (Gen 3:24; Ps 80:1) and the six-winged worshipping seraphim (Isa 6:2, 6). Perhaps here we can include "the four living creatures" around the throne of God (Rev 4:6–8). Two angels are named, including Michael (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 1:9; Rev 12:9) and Gabriel (Daniel 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26). The descriptions in Daniel about Michael as "one of the chief princes" (Daniel 10:13) and in Revelation where John speaks of "Michael and his angels" (Rev 12:7) fighting against Satan also give the impression of some kind of military hierarchy among God's angels. Even Jesus' reference to being able to call "twelve legions of angels" (Matt 26:53) has a clear militaristic element. We learn in such passages that angels are powerful, numerous, holy, and under God's sovereign control. Angels are

spirits (Heb 1:14) who can either do God's will as his servants (Ps 103:20–21) or sin by opposing him and being punished accordingly (2 Peter 2:4). Yet, their destinies, like ours, are predestined, since “elect angels” are specified in the Bible (1 Tim 5:21). A non-elect angel is a demon. Angels in God's favor enjoy the privileged status of seeing “the face” of the “Father who is in heaven” (Matt 18:10; 24:36). They are “mighty ones” in a way that humans are not (Ps 103:20) and occupy various levels of authority and spheres of responsibility (Col 1:16). Jesus speaks casually of calling “more than twelve legions³⁴ of angels” if he desired (Matt 26:53), and Revelation 5:11 speaks of “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” of angels. Clearly, their number is great indeed! The Bible also seems to indicate something like guardian angels (Matt 18:10) assigned to each of us. Angels delight in the triumphs and wisdom of God (Eph 3:10) and in the salvation of sinners (Luke 15:10). Their awareness of our corporate worship services is to motivate great care in us (1 Cor 11:10). Finally, though hard for us to imagine now, one day we will judge the angels; they will not judge us (1 Cor 6:3).

Demons are created by God (Ps 148:2–5; Col 1:16). In Revelation 12:9, John refers to “Satan...and his angels,” so a demon is a fallen angel. Peter refers to this idea: “God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment” (2 Pet 2:4). In the gospels we read numerous accounts of Jesus encountering and bettering demons who are oppressing and harming people in a variety of ways (Matt 4:24; 8:16; Mark 5:1–20). It is Jesus' absolute dominance of demons that signifies his kingdom has come: “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20). Given that God created “the heaven and the earth” in Genesis 1:1, and in 1:31, this entire creation is considered “very good,” Bavinck says that Satan and his angels fell after the sixth

³⁴ A “legion” being 6,000 troops at the time of Augustus (BDAG, *λεγιών*, 588).

day.³⁵ As we will see below when we look at the end times (eschatology), God’s triumph over the devil and his demons will one day be complete. Right now it is *certain* but not yet *accomplished*. One day it will be accomplished (Rev 20:7–10).

The Worship of the Creator

Throughout the Bible the truth that God created all things is to inspire worship and faith. We can hear the summons to faith in Jeremiah, where he prophesies of a future deliverance for the captive nation and also a new covenant (Jer 31:1–32:15). Then to encourage his hearers (and likely himself), he cries out, “Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you” (Jer 32:17).

We are called to worship by the “twenty-four elders” around God’s throne, who have thrones of their own but nonetheless bow and proclaim, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev 4:11).

Calvin calls the creation “a dazzling theater” displaying the glory of God.³⁶ “Wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory,” and the whole of creation acts as a kind of “mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible.”³⁷ Man himself is such an example: “As all acknowledge, the human body shows itself to be a composition that its Artificer is rightly judged a wonder-worker.”³⁸ Amen!

³⁵ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 221.

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.5.8.

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.5.1.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.5.2.

God's Providence

After God's creation of all things, we can consider his ongoing relationship to them. Here we enter the world of his "providence." The word "providence" is not a familiar one. It is connected to a Latin word (*providentia*) and Greek word (*pronoia*) that have to do with "prescience or foresight," and with God, knowledge of the future includes bringing that future about exactly as he intends.³⁹ Creation brings all the stuff into existence in the visible and invisible realms, and his providence is where God takes all this stuff and sustains it and makes it accomplish exactly what he intends.

God's Providence includes *everything* that is. Nothing that exists exists independently of God, and nothing that exists is or does anything he does not intend: "From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rom 11:36). Everything from devils to dust to daylilies to diseases to department stores to dying stars is included in God's providence. Even the hearts of men: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Prov 21:1). The NASB actually sees that last "*he* will" as referring to God, and so writes it as, "He turns it wherever He wishes" (NASB). "In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him" (Eccl 7:14).

Such a view of God's providence is completely opposed to the Deist idea of God. For a Deist, god is the watchmaker, a god who brings the watch into existence but then lets that watch exist apart from himself. This is contrary to the God revealed in the pages of our Bible. In the most complete and comprehensive way possible, all visible and invisible, living and non-living beings cry out, "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

³⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 165.

A definition from the *Trinity Confession of Faith* (only slightly modifying the *Westminster Confession*) defines God's providence this way:

God, the good Creator of all things, in his infinite power and wisdom upholds, directs, disposes, and governs all creatures and things from the greatest even to the least by his most wise and holy providence to the end for which they were created according to his infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable counsel of his own will. This is all to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.

TCOF 6.1

God's providence here is said to contain three components we can summarize as (1) preservation ("upholds"), (2) cooperation ("directs, disposes"), and (3) "government."

First, God's providence includes his "preservation" of all that is. In order for all the stuff of the visible and invisible universe to accomplish God's will, it must remain in existence and thus be "preserved." This is no automatic fact of the universe. And it does not happen in the way a Deist might imagine. A Deist imagines a Watchmaker god, one who creates everything and then sits back and watches it unfold. No, God's preserving is an active expression of his power over the creation. Remember, Christ "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb 1:3).

Second, God's providence includes "cooperation," the way he cooperates with all things and creatures to make them accomplish his predetermined ends. "Cooperation" speaks to the way God makes all the stuff of the universe to have certain and specific properties. Plants, animals, the atmosphere, humans, and all created things have properties according to their created uniqueness. God's providence generally works through and in and with these properties. That is what we mean by "cooperation" above (sometimes called concurrence by theologians). Deer are not typically brought forth from nothing as on the sixth day of creation.

Instead, a deer gives birth to a deer (a faun). And yet, “The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth” (Ps 29:9). Typically we are sustained by eating and drinking, which is God’s power cooperating, as it were, with our bodies’ “natural” functions. Of course, he can also choose to circumvent this natural function. When Moses was sustained for forty days without food or water (Exod 34:28), this was a miracle. Truly, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). More can be said about “cooperation.” A rock falls into a lake, and there is a splash. The rock caused the splash by falling into the water. In this case, God caused the splash by the involvement of a rock falling. The properties of gravity, the rock, and the water were all involved, and there was a chain of events, and the result of all this working together was a splash. “Cooperation” involves all of this.

Third, God’s providence includes his “government” of all things, so that all things reach the appointed end of bringing glory to him. God directs all things toward a particular, toward his chosen goal. There is an overarching purpose and destination for all that is happening. History is a river racing toward its ocean, not a circle repeating endlessly or a wave on a sea blown about randomly. Ultimately, the goal is God’s glory (Isa 43:7). As Romans 11:36 says, all things are “to him. To him be the glory forever.” This end and goal of all things is achieved by all things working according to his sovereign power at each step along the way. His “governing” hand is like the two banks of a river that guide and define that river through many turns and drops, causing it always to progress toward its final destination.

Miracles

Two issues are often discussed under the heading of God’s providence, since they both have to do with God’s dealings with his creation. The first of these is miracles, and the second is the problem of evil. I will start with miracles.

Miracles are sometimes called his “extraordinary providences.”⁴⁰ It is sometimes hard to determine when “ordinary providence” stops and where “extraordinary providence” starts. Yet, the idea is that God is acting more *directly* into a situation than the more typical cause-and-effect chain of events we observe. Where it gets complicated is that given everything that happens is a work of God, in some ways everything is miraculous. A sunrise and sunset are not naturally occurring events but the miraculous intervention of God! And yet, the Bible does talk about miracles. Moses did “miracles” before Pharaoh (Exod 4:21), and part of the testimony God provided for the apostles and Christ himself was “by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit” (Heb 2:4). “Miracles” in the New Testament in the ESV is typically a translation of a word meaning “power” (*dunamis*). A miracle is a demonstration of God’s “power” where his normal providence is interrupted in a dramatic and wondrous fashion. Typically, his providential guidance of the universe results in 24-hour days and the earth rotating around the sun in a fairly consistent manner. But in Joshua 10, God acted on behalf of his people in answer to Joshua’s prayer such that “the sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day” (Josh 10:13). Typically, God’s providence regarding death is that it is a permanent state and continues without end. But in John 11, Jesus raised Lazarus out of death by calling him out of the tomb (John 11:43). Miracles are not the exclusive work of biblical figures, however, for Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12 that “the working of miracles” is one of the gifts of the Spirit given to his people in the church age (1 Cor 12:10; 14:1). One day the perfect will come (Christ’s return) and such gifts will cease (1 Cor 13:8–10).

A miracle in the New Testament is often called a “sign and wonder” (Acts 2:22, 43). This is appropriate, since a miracle is a “sign” of God’s power and presence and the truth of the gospel, and it is also a “wonder” for his people—all people!—to behold. May

⁴⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 176.

God multiply the working of miracles in our day for the glory of his great name!

The Problem of Evil

With God’s providence we step into one of the thorniest issues in theology. It is often referred to as “the problem of evil.” “The problem of evil” has been framed in different ways, but always the riddle is how God can be both good *and* sovereign if evil exists. Some are content to say that God is good *but not* sovereign, and thus he is not able to stop the evil that exists.⁴¹ Theoretically, one could say he is sovereign but not good, too, but I have never heard of this being defended by anyone. More people will simply say evil exists, because there is no God at all. We will see this approach is not really possible. Let us work through the problem one step at a time.

First, the fact we live in a fallen world must be a central fact in our interpretation of the world and the lives we live. Adam’s sin affected everyone and everything (Gen 3:15–19; Rom 5:12–21; 8:19–25). Nothing is outside of its blast radius. God’s providence is thus operating in a *fallen world* where all human hearts and minds are *depraved*. We should not think of people as basically good and needing to be pushed to sin. Romans 3:12 says, “no one does good, not even one.” Our tendency is to sin and pursue sinful actions, unless we are directed otherwise. The same is true with the creation. The creation is not a tame land where crops and rainstorms always do just what is needed for human flourishing. Ours instead is a world where “thorns and thistles” are far easier to grow than crops (Gen 3:18) and where “moth and rust destroy” just as quickly as we can build and create (Matt 6:19). Again, the world is fallen and human hearts and minds are depraved. The great surprise of life in our world, therefore, is not when people sin and we are on the

⁴¹ Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (NY: Anchor, 2004).

receiving end of the sinful treatment of others. The great surprise is when this is not true.

Second, it is important to say that acknowledging evil as a problem is really to accept the existence of God. There is no good and no evil if there is no God. All absolute standards of right and wrong or good and evil depend on the existence of a God who defines these. Alvin Plantinga makes this argument and says you can argue for the existence of God from the existence of evil. He calls it “the argument from evil”:

Many philosophers offer an antitheistic argument from evil, and perhaps they have some force. But there is also a theistic argument from evil. There is real and genuine evil in the world: evil such that it isn't just a matter of personal opinion that the thing in question is abhorrent, and furthermore it doesn't matter if those who perpetrate it think it is good, and could not be convinced by anything we said. And it is plausible to think that in a nontheistic or at any rate a naturalistic universe, there could be no such thing. So perhaps you think there is such a thing as genuine and horrifying evil, and that in a nontheistic universe, there could not be; then you have another theistic argument....From a naturalistic perspective, there is nothing much more to evil—say the sheer horror of the Holocaust, of Pol Pot, or a thousand other villains—than there is to the way in which animals savage each other. [It is simply] a natural outgrowth of natural processes.....The point here is that [evil] is objectively horrifying. We find it horrifying: and that is part of its very nature, as opposed to the naturalistic way of thinking about it where there really can't be much of anything like objective horrifyingness....

On a naturalistic way of looking at the matter, it is hard to see how there can really be such a thing as evil.

Alvin Plantinga⁴²

Third, we need to affirm the basic idea that God is not and cannot be the Author of sin. “Author of sin” language is often used in Reformed writings to speak of God’s connection to sin. Though he controls it, he is not the “Author” of it. The *Westminster Confession* says, “God...neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin” (*WCF* 5.4; cf. *TCOF* 6.4). John Frame says “Author” is “rarely defined” in theological writings, “but it seems to mean both that God is the efficient cause of evil and that by causing evil he actually does something wrong.”⁴³ “Efficient” cause here means the direct or immediate cause of something and is in opposition to “ultimate cause.” Turretin says God cannot “be the author of sin. For he only can be esteemed the author of sin who decrees and wills sins as to efficiency and approbation, not however as to permission and ordination only....God is occupied not only in permitting, but also in governing, terminating and directing them to a good end. It is one thing therefore to will sin itself, but another to will its permission and event.”⁴⁴

Fourth, sin and evil are never spinning out of control, but the beginning, progress, and end of them are always fully controlled by God. This point comes from Francis Turretin. He speaks of the “beginning,” the “progress,” and the “end” of the sin: “As to its beginning, he freely permits it; as to its progress, he wisely directs it; as to its end, he powerfully terminates and brings it to a good end.”⁴⁵ God permitting sin can be seen in Romans 1:24–28, though

⁴² Alvin Plantinga, “Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments,” in *Alvin Plantinga, Contemporary Philosophy in Focus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 224–25.

⁴³ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 294.

⁴⁴ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology: Eleventh Through Seventeenth Topics*, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R, 1994), 2:532.

⁴⁵ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:516.

he is quick to point out this permission does not mean God is suddenly calling sin something un sinful. It means a “physical” allowing a person to carry out the sin they desire to do. Even in his divine permission, God’s will is still fully efficacious.⁴⁶ As Bavinck says, “What is done against his will is not done apart from his will.”⁴⁷ Sin can begin in a person’s heart by God affecting a person’s desires or thoughts, which then settle on a sinful path the person (or demon or the devil himself) desires to take. But still, in the performing of the sin he acts to have it do what he intends and not more, and have it last only as long as necessary and no longer.⁴⁸ If we think of Joseph’s treatment by his brothers, Joseph’s life was not taken, even though he was enslaved. Jesus’s suffering was terrible but could have been worse. It was destined that his bones not be broken, for instance (John 19:36).

Fifth, the Bible speaks of a kind of “divine permission” where God permits a sinner to do something that violates God’s own preceptive will. Frame says that when the Reformed speak of “God’s permission,” this is not “mere permission,” for “God’s ‘permission’ is an efficacious permission.”⁴⁹ This idea is intended to capture on the part of God “a kind of reluctance born of his holy hatred of evil.”⁵⁰ The Bible speaks in these terms in Job 1–2:

When Satan acts, he acts, in an obvious sense, by God’s permission....Satan is on a short leash, acting only within the limits assigned by God. And in this respect all sinful acts are similar. The sinner can only go so far, before he meets the judgment of God....It is right, therefore, to use *permission* to apply to God’s ordination of sin. But we should not assume, as Arminians⁵¹ do, that divine permission

⁴⁶ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:516.

⁴⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, 2:361.

⁴⁸ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:521.

⁴⁹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 297.

⁵⁰ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 297.

⁵¹ “Arminians” are followers of the theology of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), though most encounter his theology through the writings of Arminians like John

is anything less than sovereign ordination....Permission, then, is a form of ordination, a form of causation.

John Frame⁵²

Other Passages that speak of God permitting us to pursue the evil in our hearts:

And they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved. (Ps 78:29)

He gave them what they asked, but sent a wasting disease among them. (Ps 106:15)

In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. (Acts 14:16)

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.²⁶ For this reason ***God gave them up to dishonorable passions.*** For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.²⁸ And since they did not see fit to

Wesley and other Wesleyans (or authors like C. S. Lewis). Such theologians would typically argue that God has not decreed all that happens, that there is the ability to resist his grace in salvation, that his predestination is informed by his foreknowledge. Most would argue that sin has not destroyed our free will to such an extent that we cannot choose God, and some would argue like Wesley that there is a kind of “prevenient grace” given to us to overcome the effects of the fall so we can choose to respond to the offer of the gospel. The Reformed reject all these teachings.

⁵² Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 297, 298. See also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, 2:361.

acknowledge God, ***God gave them up to a debased mind*** to do what ought not to be done. (Rom 1:24–28)

Sixth, though God is the primary and ultimate cause of all things, evil always has a real and secondary cause. When we turn to the doctrine of providence, we step into the realm of primary and secondary causes. That sounds complex, and it is. It has to do with the idea that something can be the cause of something but not be the *primary* cause of something. Francis Turretin (1623–1687) refers to the question of how God as the primary cause and humans as the second cause work together “one of the most difficult in theology and error is most dangerous,” so “it demands a peculiar and accurate discussion.”⁵³ To illustrate primary and secondary causes, let us say I broke Rick’s nose by punching him. I am the cause of Rick’s broken nose. But then let us say that this happened in the fifth round of a boxing match, where I was boxing against Rick. Now the real cause of his broken nose is more complicated. If he did not enter the boxing ring, his nose would not be broken. The fact is, he chose to box me, so his broken nose is not really my fault in the sense of being morally in the wrong. But to add to the situation, maybe he only entered the boxing match because a thug threatened to hurt someone he loves if he did not. In that case, the thug is the *primary* cause of his broken nose (at least, in our scenario), and I am only a secondary cause far down the line of causes. So, even at a human level we can think of secondary causes (my punch) and more ultimate causes (the thug who coerced him).

Theologians have used the language of “primary” and “secondary” (or “second”) causes to speak of how an action or event has a more direct but secondary cause and a less direct but primary cause. All things have God as the primary cause but any number of people or things as secondary causes. Of course for something like Jesus’s resurrection, there is no other factor in the causal chain than God himself. He is the primary cause and there is no secondary

⁵³ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:505.

cause. Far more often, he is the primary cause of an action and there are any number of secondary causes. But in all these secondary causes, we must say that “he uses second causes, but none of the second causes work without him. He uses second causes, but he is always working in and with those second causes.”⁵⁴ If this were not true, then it could happen that God might have “decreed from eternity” an action and yet “God’s eternal decree could be frustrated.”⁵⁵ In the words of John Frame,

In the narrative of nature and history, almost all⁵⁶ events in the story have two causes: divine and creaturely. The creaturely causes are genuine. Creatures bring about the events they cause, and the events would not come about without those causes. The same, however, can be said of the divine causes. Creation is like a book written by a gifted novelist, who creates a story-world in which events have causes within the story, but in which every event is brought about by the volition of the author.

John Frame⁵⁷

Seventh, though God is fully sovereign over all events, we sin by freely choosing to sin and not by being coerced. When discussing God’s providence, Turretin says that in God’s “predetermination” he “conserves the liberty of the will.”⁵⁸ Yet, he is careful to define what he means by “liberty.” He does not mean an indifference to possible actions so that any number of choices could be made without any real leaning. This he calls “indifference.” Instead “liberty must be defined by willingness and spontaneity,” meaning that a person always *wills* the choice they

⁵⁴ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 181.

⁵⁵ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:508.

⁵⁶ Frame says “almost all” to allow for certain miracles where God is the *only* cause of something. One example he gives is the resurrection of Christ (*Systematic Theology*, 182).

⁵⁷ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 182.

⁵⁸ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:508.

make and they spontaneously make the choice instead of being compelled “by a physical or brute” force to make the choice.⁵⁹

Others speak of this kind of free will using the term “compatibilism.” It means that God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are *compatible* and both are biblically proven, even if mystery remains as to how exactly this can be. D. A. Carson points to Genesis 50:19–20; Philippians 2:12–13; and Acts 4:23–31 to demonstrate the idea.⁶⁰ John Frame also discusses compatibilism and says that it defines free will or the freedom we have as people as “the freedom to do what you want to do.”⁶¹ It is called “compatible,” because it is “compatible with determinism” (God’s sovereignty). He sees this as biblically sound but in contrast to “libertarianism,” which is a more extreme form of human freedom. Libertarianism says that we are able to choose freely between any number of alternatives without any outside influences.⁶² But such a view of human freedom cannot be squared with God’s sovereign control over all things and his initial decree of all that happens. These ideas are captured in the *TCOF*:

In relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly so that there is not anything befalls any by chance or without his providence. Yet, by the same providence he orders them to happen according to the nature of second causes either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

TCOF 6.2

Eighth, while we cannot fully remove the difficulty of the reality of sin and evil, we can provide some explanation(s) for why God would allow it to remain. The above points help us to think through the issue, but they do not ultimately remove it. Yet, for

⁵⁹ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:508.

⁶⁰ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?: Reflections on Suffering & Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 199–227.

⁶¹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 823–24.

⁶² Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 825.

some people, the above points will helpfully reframe the problem so that the offense of it is removed. But three more things can be said which also provide some kind of answer for why a good and sovereign God would allow sin and evil to remain. These come from John Frame. He calls them “three defenses” to use against the problem of evil.

(1) “Normative Defense: Human beings have no right to bring accusations against God.”⁶³ Though it is tempting for all of us, and we are sympathetic to doing it, it is still important to say we should not make accusations against God for what he determines to happen in our lives or in the lives of those we love. We are the clay and he is the potter: “But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’”²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?” (Rom 9:20–21). The answer is, of course, YES, the potter has the right to do as he pleases with “the clay” of his creation. This is a hard truth, but Frame is right.

(2) “Situational Defense: God will always bring good out of evil.”⁶⁴ This is what he calls “the *greater-good-defense*,” which means that there is a “greater good” God is pursuing than simply removing evil from our world and lives. This “greater good” is ultimately not our comfort or pleasure or understanding but “greater glory to God....God is glorified in the judgment of sinners, and that is a good thing, not an evil.”⁶⁵ We can hear this “greater good” in passages like Romans 8:28, where God promises to *believers* that he will bring a greater good out of the whole tangle of goods and evils, triumphs and tragedies, of our lives.

(3) “Existential Defense: God will comfort us so that our hearts are fully assured of the justice and rightness of his actions.”⁶⁶ Frame means that “God will comfort us” in the future. This truth

⁶³ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 301.

⁶⁴ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 301.

⁶⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 289, 291.

⁶⁶ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 301.

rests in the future reality that when all is said and done, we will not merely accept God's choices in all situations, we will celebrate them and worship him because of them. We will be those who sing "the song of Moses" with all the redeemed:

Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! ⁴ Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. (Rev 15:3-4)

Once again, when we consider the intricacies of suffering and evil and how they impact us at such personal and painful ways, we are confronted by the reality that God is God and we are not. His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. We can only bow in submission and worship, and we do not raise a clenched fist in accusation. He alone is God. But there is here reason to trust and not to doubt, for "no accident and no necessity, no arbitrariness and no force, no mere caprice nor iron destiny controls the world and its history and the life and lot of mankind. Behind all secondary causes there lurks and works almighty will of an almighty God and a faithful Father."⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 182.