

“Human Sin and God’s Purpose: Some thoughts on the Doctrine of Divine Concurrence”

My phone usually doesn’t ring at 6:45 AM. I could hear someone leaving me an urgent message: “turn on the television!” When I turned the TV on, I watched in horror as a commercial jet airliner crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center in New York. From the smoke pouring out of the other Trade Center tower, it was clear that this was not the first plane to strike. The TV reporter was still speculating about what was becoming obvious—this was a terrorist attack. Like most Americans, I spent the rest of the morning of September 11, 2001, glued to the television watching the Pentagon burn, shocked at the huge loss of life, and coming to the inevitable conclusion that Usama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda terrorist network was behind these savage acts. I knew that America was going to war.

But it was not long before the phone rang again. This time a twenty-something year-old member of our church was calling, deeply troubled by horrors they had witnessed in New York and Washington. Looking for some solace, the caller soon checked off a series of difficult questions such incidents always seem to bring to mind. “Pastor, Paul says in Ephesians 1:11 that God ‘works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.’ Does this mean that God is responsible for this? Is this horrible tragedy really a part of God’s purpose?”

I was very thankful that the caller divided their question into two parts, because that way I was able to answer each part of the question with fewer qualifications. “No, God is not responsible for this.” “Terrorists flew those planes, not God.” And, “yes, this horrible act is still a part of God’s plan.” We discussed the fact that God is sovereign and omniscient, so nothing like this is outside of God’s will or purpose. God is still on his throne. But we also talked about the fact that God is gracious and compassionate and takes no delight in the suffering of his creatures. Indeed, God promises to comfort all those who call upon his name. Then we talked about hope. According to Romans 8:28, somehow and in some way, when all is said and done, God will turn this horrible event to good.

Whether the caller did so purposely or not, making a distinction between God’s moral responsibility for sinful human actions (the first question), and the question of whether or not sinful human acts fall within the scope of God’s eternal decree (the second question), is an important one. Indeed, this is what the Scriptures teach. But making this distinction inevitably brings us to the topic of divine concurrence, which is defined as God’s relationship to secondary causes. How can it be that the horrible tragedy of September 11 is a part of God’s eternal purpose? And if it is, how can we at the same time affirm that God is good and that those who plotted these acts and flew the airplanes into the Twin Towers are fully responsible for their crimes against humanity? This is one of the most difficult and perplexing questions in all of Christian theology. But tragedies like 9-1-1 bring such questions to the forefront and there is no escaping them.

Before we proceed any further, we need to make several very important qualifications. Questions like this have been asked before. So, we are not left totally on our own in this regard. September 11 was shocking to many Americans—especially younger Americans—because terrorist attacks upon civilians have not happened on American soil before. But since human tragedy is as old as Adam and the fall of the human race into sin, the questions raised by the events of 9-1-1 are certainly not new. Christians have thought about these things before, and so have the biblical writers. Therefore, in order to formulate answers to such questions which not only supply pastoral comfort but deal with the weighty issues at hand, we must first look to the biblical data dealing with God’s relationship to human sin. While the

biblical writers do speak to certain aspects of this relationship, we must also note that a great deal of mystery remains.

Another qualification we ought to keep in mind in this discussion is that we are creatures, limited in knowledge, and bound by time and by space. But God is not subject to such human limitations. Therefore, when we as creatures wrestle with questions such as these—which, it must be candidly admitted, are often beyond our full comprehension—we find ourselves in a difficult predicament. God’s ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9). The secret things belong to him alone (Deuteronomy 29:29). Since this is the case, there is a great temptation on our part to answer difficult questions like this in the abstract. “Can God do such and such?” “What about the hypothetical case where . . .?” While the temptation to do this is great, we must avoid it at all costs. Not only is a little creaturely humility in order when we deal with questions like this, but if our curiosity gets the better of us, we risk entering a maze from which we cannot escape. It is not a sin, after all, *not* to have all the answers.

When it comes to the subject of divine concurrence and tragedies like 9-1-1, there are certain things we must affirm because the Scriptures affirm them and certain things we must be careful not to affirm, because the Scriptures are silent about them. From the outset, it is essential to avoid defining divine concurrence in the abstract, as just mentioned. If we tackle this topic without reflection upon how this matter is developed in the biblical text, we risk creating a “god” in our own sinful image. The best way to proceed, therefore, is to observe how it is that God acts in this regard throughout redemptive history. As we will see, this includes the exercise of God’s sovereign will over all things, coupled with the fact that God’s will is exercised in such a way that his creatures function as true secondary causes. But only by discussing this topic within the context of God’s self-revelation can we establish clear theological boundaries from which we ought not depart, while at the same time leaving sufficient room for the mystery we know is here, precisely at the point where the Scripture leaves it, with the secret things of God.

Let us begin, then, with those things we must affirm about God’s relationship to human sin. First, we should be clear from the beginning that God’s plan and purpose includes the creation of all things. Paul tells the Colossians, “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him” (Colossians 1:16 cf. Romans 11:36). Things created by God, are said to be “for God,” that is, for his own purposes. Indeed, once we have in mind the fact that God created all things, it is a very reasonable to assume that God created all things for the specific plans and purposes just mentioned, as well as giving created things the capacities to fulfill the purposes for which they are made. The prophet Isaiah makes this very point. “For this is what the LORD says—he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited—he says: `I am the LORD, and there is no other’” (Isaiah 45:18).

Second, as my caller indicated on the morning of the September 11, it is natural to attempt to answer all questions about God’s relationship to human sin within the context of God’s sovereignty. But there are several things we ought to have in mind before we turn to texts such as Ephesians 1:11. When Paul tells us that God works all things according to his eternal purpose which is worked out according to the counsel of his will (Ephesians 1:11), Paul is certainly presupposing the fact that this is the case because God is also the creator of those very creatures who carry out his purposes. This means that whenever we talk about divine concurrence, we must begin by affirming that God’s eternal plan and purpose defines not only the ends for which all things have been created, but also entails the creation of the specific

agents with the necessary capacities to bring about those things which God has decreed. This means that all things, including human sin, fall within God's plan and purpose.

Third, as soon as these words proceed from our mouths, it is vital to point out that the Scriptures are also crystal clear about the fact that while human sin is part of God's eternal purpose—the way in which human sin operates within God's purposes will remain a mystery—God is not in any sense the author of sin. James 1:13 tells us plainly that “when tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” In Deuteronomy 32:4, we read, “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” Likewise, the Psalmist declares, “The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him (92:5).” Therefore, even though human sin is part of God's plan and purpose, it nevertheless remains *human* sin, not God's sin.

A fourth point we must make is that human sin is the fruit of the human race's fall in Adam. As Francis Schaeffer so pointedly put it, “we are talking about real sin and real guilt before a holy God.” This is important for several reasons. For one thing, this serves to reinforce the previous point that God is not in any sense the author of sin. Sin may be a part of God's plan and purpose, but sin does not enter the human race until Adam violated the terms of his probation in Eden. As we read in Genesis 2:16-17: “And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’”

Another reason it is important to trace human sin to the fall of Adam is that the entire human race is guilty before God, not only for our sin in Adam (who acts as our biological and federal head, cf. Romans 5:12-19), but also for our own individual acts of sin which spring from our sinful hearts (Psalm 51:5; Romans 6:33). This means that even though human sin is part of God's decree, sin is not only the fault of the creature, but sinful acts are genuinely sinful. Just because God has decreed that certain acts will come to pass, this does not remove real guilt from the agent who commits the act in question. Nor does it mean that sinful and evil acts of human agents are somehow “good” because God has decreed them. Sin is sin. Evil is evil. Throughout the Biblical drama we find that God's creatures are always held responsible for their actions, even though the Scriptures repeatedly indicate that these acts were part of his plan and purpose.

That this point is a difficult one is certain. That it is taught in Scripture is clear. But the question as to *how* God can decree that a certain act comes to pass while holding the party who acts morally responsible for that action, is a mystery. But even though we may not understand how this can be, the fact remains that this is exactly what the Scriptures teach. This can be seen in several well-known biblical incidents.

We begin with the story of Joseph as recounted in the latter part of Genesis. As the story goes, Joseph's older brothers grew to hate him, because it was becoming obvious to them that their father Israel (Jacob) “loved Joseph more than any of his other sons” (Genesis 37:1). As a demonstration of his great love for his son, Israel gave Joseph a richly ornamented robe, the infamous “coat of many colors.” But “when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated [Joseph] and could not speak a kind word to him” (37:4). And then when Joseph had a dream which foretold that his brothers would one day bow down before him, we read “they hated him all the more” (37:8 ff.). Joseph's fate was sealed.

When Israel sent Joseph to check on his brothers at Dothan, they were already plotting to kill “the dreamer,” as they now called him. Reuben, we are told, pled with his brothers not to kill Joseph and instead hoped to deliver Joseph back to his father (37:22). But things did not go as Reuben had hoped.

The other brothers stripped Joseph's robe from him. They threw him in a dry cistern and shred his coat, covering it with blood so as to make it look as though a wild animal had killed him. But when a trade caravan came by unexpectedly, the brothers sold Joseph into slavery for a mere twenty shekels. The guilt of selling their younger brother into slavery was much less, apparently, than that of killing him. And so Joseph was eventually taken to Egypt, where he ended up in the service of a certain Potiphar, who happened to be captain of the Pharaoh's guard and the husband of a woman with a very overactive libido.

Throughout this entire account, the foibles of sinful human nature are everywhere on display. We have a doting father, with a favorite, albeit, somewhat brash son who revels in his father's favor. Then we have a number of jealous older brothers, although one of them, Reuben, has a guilty conscience and tries to save his little brother from the fate his other brothers were plotting. The biblical narrative everywhere attributes the culpability for all of the emotions, the scheming and the plotting directly to the individuals involved. It is the father who dotes. It is Joseph who is brash. Reuben is troubled in conscience. The older brothers are jealous of Joseph to the point that they plot his death. Indeed, they mock their little brother, "the dreamer," with these words: "we'll see what comes of his dreams" (37:20). Their actions are evil, and they are guilty for them.

But once in Egypt, Joseph, as we know, went on to become an interpreter of dreams and eventually rose to such a high rank that the Pharaoh put him in charge of all Egypt (41:41). Some time later, because of famine throughout the land of Canaan, Israel (Jacob) sent his sons into Egypt to purchase grain, where, unbeknownst to them, they encounter the very same little brother they plotted to kill but instead sold into slavery. When the time comes for Joseph to reveal himself to his brothers in what turns out to be a very emotional reunion, he informs them: "do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you." (Genesis 45:5). In fact, Joseph goes on to say to them, "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt" (45:8).

How can it be that God sent Joseph into Egypt when his brothers were the ones who plotted the act and carried it out? Years later, when Jacob died in Egypt, Joseph, in order to assuage his brothers' fear that he would take revenge upon them, reminds them of the following. "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:18-19). With these words, we have the doctrine of divine concurrence set forth in the most basic of terms. "You intended to harm me," says Joseph. Therefore, Joseph's brothers are truly guilty for their own evil acts. But Joseph also goes on to say, "God intended it for good," so as to accomplish his purposes, i.e., that which he has decreed to come to pass, the preservation of Israel and the twelve tribes in Egypt. Therefore, God is sovereign, executing his eternal decree in time and in space, but doing so through the agency of these men, who, through their own willful and sinful actions, bring to pass the very thing God has decreed. Thus the actions of Joseph's brothers fulfill God's purposes, while the sin involved is theirs. That this happens is clear. It is what the Scriptures teach. How this works—i.e., the mechanics of it—is never explained. This is one of those "secret things" which belongs to God.

Another biblical incident is even more infamous, but equally important in developing a doctrine of divine concurrence. Recall that during the Pentecost sermon, Peter is preaching to the crowds who have assembled after hearing a great commotion in the upper room. When Peter comes to the point in his sermon of explaining that what has just happened is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32, he goes on to say in Acts 2:22-24: "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves

know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."

Just as was the case with Joseph and his brothers, Peter likewise asserts two fundamental points in verse 23. Jesus was crucified according to God's plan and purpose ("God's set purpose and foreknowledge"), and that those who actually crucified him are fully responsible for their actions ("with the help of wicked men, you put him to death"). The same set of circumstances apply here as they did with Joseph and his brothers. We read in the gospels of the Pharisees plotting to kill Jesus (e.g. John 11:45-57, where the Pharisees plot to kill Jesus because he raised his friend Lazarus from the dead). These men are the ones who scheme. These men willfully and culpably plot our Lord's death for a variety of selfish reasons. They are guilty—Peter calls them "wicked men"—for putting to death the sinless Lamb of God. Indeed, throughout the gospels, Jesus himself speaks of the necessity of his own death (Matthew 16:21; 20:17-19; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22-27). His death was not only foreordained by God (Revelation 13:8) it was predicted by Israel's prophets (Psalm 22:16; Isaiah 53:5-12). Therefore, Christ was crucified according to the plan and purpose of God, and yet, those who crucified him committed the greatest crime imaginable, putting to death the Son of God and their own Messiah. But what amazing good came from this horrific event!

And this brings us back to the events of 9-1-1. Mohamed Atta, along with all those who acted with him, is fully responsible for crashing a civilian airliner, full of passengers, into an unsuspecting and crowded commercial center. At the moment of his death he did not enter paradise to receive the favors of seventy-two virgins as he hoped. Instead, he entered into eternal torment. As John tells us in the Apocalypse, Hell is not the absence of God, but the eternal presence of God, without the cross of Jesus Christ turning aside his wrath (Revelation 14:10-11). God will punish him for his sins for all eternity.

And yet, Mohamed Atta's despicable act is nevertheless part of God's unfolding plan and purpose for the nations, as well as for all of those individuals involved in the events of 9-1-1. But as difficult as this is to accept and comprehend, let us not overlook a very important point about divine concurrence. Joseph's brothers meant him harm, but God intended their actions for good. The wicked men who crucified the savior committed a horrible travesty, but a travesty which secured for us our redemption from the guilt and power of sin. And just as God did not leave Jesus in the grave, but raised him up as Lord of Life, let us never forget that God has the power to turn sinful human acts into good. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the proof.

Where does all of this leave us? God created all things and gave to them the abilities for fulfilling the ends which he has determined. Indeed, all things which come to pass fit within God's plan and purpose, including human sin. And yet, God is neither the author of sin, nor its primary cause, the creature is. For sin entered the world through Adam's fall, so that we are not only guilty for Adam's sin, we are guilty for our own acts of sin. Therefore, sinful acts deserve God's punishment, and are truly sinful, even if God has included them in his plan and purpose. But God can and does use sinful human acts to bring about good. In faith, we must believe that God can and does do this in the midst of human tragedy. He did this with Joseph. He did it with Jesus. Finally, we must humbly admit that a great mystery remains, not as to the fact of divine concurrence, but as to the precise means by which God works out his purposes without being in any sense the author of human sin. After all, he is God and we are creatures. The secret things belong to him alone.