

PART FIVE

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER TWELVE

TOO WEIRD TO BE TRUE?

In this final chapter, I offer a brief description and summation of the argument of this book followed by some comments on how we ought to think about the apparent weirdness of its conclusions.

Brief Summation of the Argument

I have argued that the Bible teaches divine determinism—the perspective that literally nothing whatsoever occurs in reality that has not ultimately been determined by God himself. My argument for divine determinism has been based on the fact that both the biblical concept of God as the creator *ex nihilo* and the biblical understanding of the nature of God's foreknowledge logically require divine determinism. Hence, divine determinism must be assumed to be the underlying worldview of the Scriptures. I further argued that, from a philosophical point of view, divine determinism is required if we are to have a sound logical foundation for the most basic indubitable assumptions of common sense. I then argued that the superficially compelling objections to divine determinism are not rationally compelling at all. The problem with these objections is that they do not fully grasp what divine determinism actually is, and they have a faulty understanding of its implications. Each of them fails to consider the radically different character of a transcendent cause *vis à vis* an ordinary cause. To grasp clearly what divine determinism is and what it implies, one must consider carefully the implications of God's being truly transcendent. God is not the divine bully who controls all of reality through coercive force. It is not merely that God is tough enough to force reality to do what he wants. Rather, God is the divine author of all reality. He creates every minute detail of reality exactly as he wants it to be. When he is seen as the divine bully, God's sovereign control over all things spells the death of free will and human responsibility. Clearly, that would be rationally unacceptable. But when he is viewed correctly as the transcendent author of all reality, no logical conflict exists between God's sovereign control over all things, on the one hand, and important, indubitable notions such as free will and human responsibility on the other. The net conclusion is this: Divine determinism is a philosophically sound, a philo-

sophically necessary, and a philosophically unobjectionable doctrine that is advanced by the Bible as its underlying worldview. We have no other responsible choice but to embrace divine determinism as the truth.

But, a very important point needs to be made. Belief in divine determinism does not replace my ordinary perception of, experience of, and thinking about reality. Rather, it explains the underlying relationship of reality to God, its author. It explains the metaphysical realities that underlie my ordinary, everyday experience. The conclusion of this book is not that we are forced by sound biblical reasoning to reject our everyday commonsensical perceptions and embrace divine determinism instead. Rather, it is that divine determinism describes the underlying reality that accounts for the everyday perceptions of reality that we have. We need not reject our commonsensical perceptions of our experience in order to embrace divine determinism. We can embrace both. They are not mutually exclusive.²⁰⁷ The debate over the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility has been long and enduring. If there is anything new and fresh in what I have advanced in this book, it would be these three inter-related things: (i) an understanding of God as radically and absolutely transcendent, (ii) a recognition that an important and fundamental difference exists between the logic of ordinary causation and the logic of transcendent causation and an insistence that we not confuse the two as we reflect on the issues involved in this debate, and (iii) a recognition that we can arrive at an intuitive grasp of the logic of transcendent causation by analyzing the relationship of a human author to the choices made by the characters in his story, since an author radically transcends the product of his imagination in a way analogous to God's transcendence of his creation. I submit that these three elements of my argument bring about a substantial advance in our understanding of the sovereignty of God beyond the traditional understanding of divine sovereignty and the traditional terms of this debate.

Can We Believe Something So Weird and Unnatural?

One very common reaction to the conclusion reached in the argument of this book goes something like this: "Your arguments are very interesting and very persuasive, but I cannot accept divine determinism nonethe-

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less. My beliefs must be based strictly on the Bible. Your view is dependent upon a set of philosophical beliefs that are not explicitly taught by the Bible. As clever and imaginative as your strategy for reconciling divine sovereignty and human responsibility is, it is not the teaching of the Bible, so I cannot entertain it. I'll just stick to what the Bible teaches.”

As pious as this response may seem, it is fundamentally ignorant of the important issues involved. Limited determinism (or any of the other alternatives) is no less dependent upon a set of philosophical beliefs than is divine determinism. This is an unavoidable truth: how we interpret the Bible is dependent upon what set of assumptions we bring to the Bible, including our philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of God, transcendence, reality, and moral accountability. Whenever an interpretation of the biblical text arises out of our pre-understanding²⁰⁸ (and the philosophical assumptions contained in that pre-understanding), it will seem eminently “natural.” It will seem that we are just “reading what is there” and not importing any foreign ideas into the text. Correspondingly, another interpretation—arising out of some other person’s prior philosophical commitments—will seem “unnatural” to us. It will seem that they are “reading their philosophy into the text.” But we fail to appreciate that their reading and interpretation of the biblical text does not seem “unnatural” to them. Their reading of the text seems just as “natural” to them as mine does to me.

Why is this so? Because reading—by its very nature—is a process of understanding or construing the meaning of the words on a page in correspondence with what I already believe (“know”) to be true. Only one who is ignorant of the actual dynamic of verbal communication could ever articulate the goal of biblical interpretation as “making sure that I don’t read anything into the Bible,” or as “just reading the Bible for what it says without interpreting it.” By its very nature, all verbal communication requires the hearer or reader to “read something in.” All verbal communication involves words that are inherently ambiguous and mean nothing at all until the audience “interprets” them. And some of what we will read into the Bible (or any other communication) will be our philosophical assumptions. The point we must appreciate is this: *every interpretation of the Bible by every interpreter of the Bible involves importing one set of philosophical assumptions or another into one’s understanding of the text.* To believe that one is reading his Bible without importing any prior philosophical assumptions into his understanding of the text is simply to be naive about the nature of verbal communication.

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The goal of the interpreter is to make sure that the philosophical assumptions that are shaping his interpretation of the text correspond with the philosophical assumptions that shaped the author's intended meaning of the text. When they match, valid interpretation results and communication has occurred. If my interpretation of a text seems more "natural" to me than yours does, that does not make my interpretation right and yours wrong. If my interpretation is based on a view of God and reality that is radically different from that of the biblical authors, then, regardless of how "natural" it feels to me, it is not a valid interpretation.

We cannot escape the fact that, if we want to come to an understanding of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, we must engage in philosophical reflection as a part of the process. We cannot escape the need for that. If we do not engage in philosophical reflection, if we do not subject our prior philosophical commitments to scrutiny, then we will unwittingly impose a philosophical framework on the biblical text without any basis for knowing (i) whether it is a sound set of philosophical assumptions, and (ii) whether it is a philosophical framework that corresponds to the one embraced by the biblical authors.

This is exactly my assessment of why modern Christianity finds divine determinism so implausible. Modern Christians have inherited a philosophical framework that includes various assumptions that necessarily preclude the possibility of divine determinism—various assumptions about free will, moral accountability, the nature of what is real, and other important philosophical issues. But they have never subjected their philosophical framework to any serious scrutiny. They have not adopted this framework after careful consideration. They drank it in with their mother's milk. Accordingly, two important things have escaped their notice: (i) their philosophical framework is incoherent and unsound, and (ii) the biblical authors wrote out of a radically different understanding of reality, an entirely different philosophical framework. As a result, modern Christians are doomed to misinterpret the Bible with respect to the issue of divine sovereignty. Until they are willing and ready to engage in the requisite philosophical reflection, they will continue interpreting their Bibles in the light of a fundamentally unsound philosophical framework that is not the framework of the Bible itself. And all the time they will think how "natural" their understanding of the biblical text is.

Admittedly, therefore, philosophical reflection is a necessary precondition for becoming persuaded of divine determinism. But this should not be viewed with suspicion, as if it were an indictment against divine determinism, for philosophical reflection is a necessary precondition for becoming persuaded of anything that is true. Whether we like it or not,

we were created to be philosophers and we all *are* philosophers. We will either be good philosophers or bad philosophers, but we can never avoid being philosophers, for no route to truth can avoid resolving the various philosophical issues that pertain.

Nevertheless, many will still not be prepared to embrace divine determinism as it has been portrayed in this book. It is simply far too radical, far too unfamiliar, and far too weird to accept. Our previous understanding (our “pre-understanding”) has seemed to serve us well over all these years. It would seem reckless, foolhardy, and disloyal to throw it away now.

To leave the security afforded by intuitions that are familiar and launch out into a way of perceiving reality that is wildly unfamiliar is a frightening prospect. And yet, this has to be our experience whenever we undergo a revolution in our thinking.²⁰⁹ All revolutionary changes in one’s worldview are unsettling. Our initial conversion to the Christian faith was unsettling. But being unsettling didn’t make it wrong. Certainly it was worth the temporary feeling of insecurity to have taken the step to believe. So if reason requires us to embrace divine determinism, we must not let our emotional longing for security prevent us from following reason’s lead. It always takes a while to get used to a new paradigm. It takes time to become acclimated to any radically new model for understanding reality. (And, admittedly, divine determinism is a radically new model.) But, in time, one can feel just as comfortable and secure with the new paradigm as with the old. The issue must not be whether it feels comfortable and secure right now. The issue must be whether it is true.

Should we be bothered by the fact the divine determinism appears to be a small, minority viewpoint? The vast majority of Christians, it would seem, reject it. Though that’s true, one must remember that the vast majority of people reject Christianity also. But that doesn’t make the Christian faith untrue and invalid.

One of the most important forces that gives rise to the beliefs we embrace is the power of culture and tradition. Some things seem true and believable to us simply by virtue of the fact that everyone around us believes them. By the same token, other things seem implausible and false simply by virtue of the fact that no one around us believes them. The cultural environment that gives credence to beliefs in this way is what sociol-

209. However, divine determinism rightly understood is not a revolution in our way of thinking in the sense that it overturns or transplants our ordinary way of thinking about and perceiving reality. For a full discussion of this and a related issue see appendix G and appendix H. It is very important to be clear as to exactly how and in exactly what sense the paradigm of divine determinism is “new.”

ogists call a PLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURE. Modern Christian culture is a plausibility structure that rejects the doctrine of absolute divine determinism. To hold a belief contrary to the plausibility structure within which one is immersed is never easy. Secular culture is a plausibility structure that supports the doctrine of atheistic, naturalistic evolution. Accordingly, it is extremely difficult to function within secular culture and not see atheistic, naturalistic evolution as utterly plausible. The actual absurdity of the doctrine becomes invisible to us through the force of the plausibility structure. Similarly, to function within modern Christian culture and not accept the doctrines of limited determinism as obvious is difficult. Through the force of the plausibility structure, the incoherence and absurdity of those doctrines has become invisible to the modern Christian. A plausibility structure covers a multitude of logical sins when it comes to our willingness to accept certain beliefs.

Should we be bothered, then, by the degree to which those around us reject divine determinism? Not if we are persuaded that it is the only sound, reasonable worldview. If divine determinism is soundly rational and decidedly biblical, then its lack of acceptance is not an indictment against the doctrine. It is an indictment against the culture that rejects it.

While modern Christian culture would tend to see divine determinism as a truly weird point of view, divine determinism would not have seemed at all weird to most Christians throughout most of history. The prevailing view of God from the earliest origins of the Church, throughout the Middle Ages, and down to recent times was of God as the primary (ultimate) cause of everything in his creation. All other causes were only secondary causes. God was the primary cause of everything that was and everything that occurred. And X being caused by some secondary cause did not preclude X from also being caused by God, the primary cause. This view was commonplace throughout most of Christian history. Furthermore, God was considered the primary cause of all things because he was thought to exist at a level of reality above and beyond the level we inhabit. He existed outside our reality and served as its reason or cause. To employ one of the favorite descriptions of God by the medieval philosophers and theologians, God is the *ens realissimus*, THE MOST REAL BEING. God, the super-real being, is he who has imparted reality to us lesser beings, who exist on a lower level of reality. To people who acknowledged God as the *ens realissimus*, the doctrine of divine determinism would not have seemed weird or implausible. Divine determinism would have been a logical extrapolation from their basic understanding of God.

I am not suggesting that the typical medieval would have readily embraced divine determinism. I don't know that. But it would not have seemed outlandish and weird to him, for it is consonant with his philosophical framework in a way that it is not with the modern philosophical framework. From the narrow perspective of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries it will appear that divine determinism is acceptable to only a very small minority and deemed weird by the vast majority. But from the broader standpoint of the entire history of Christian thought, the vast majority of Christians would have found divine determinism eminently plausible. I am not suggesting that divine determinism *per se* was accepted by the vast majority of Christians throughout history. I am suggesting that they embraced an understanding of God that naturally and logically entails divine determinism, for God as the *ens realissimus* (the most real being) has been the prevailing concept of God throughout Christian history. In the end, that is what this study concludes: God is the most real being, *ens realissimus*, the one in whom "we live and move and have our being."