

THE  
MOST  
REAL  
BEING

# THE MOST REAL BEING

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A Biblical and Philosophical  
Defense  
of Divine Determinism

J . A . C R A B T R E E



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To Jody,  
the most important person  
in my life;  
and to John David,  
who made this  
much more than academic.

...that they should seek God,  
if perhaps they might grope for him and find him.  
Yet he is not far from any one of us,  
for **in him we live and move and have our being...**

*Acts 17:27–28*



MICHAEL MCGARTIE

## THE MOST REAL BEING **Ens Realissimus**

The “most real being” (*ens realissimus* or, more typically, *ens realissimum*) is one of several titles that medieval philosophers and theologians used to denote God. The fact that God exists on a higher level of reality than we do—that is, that he is more real than we are—is a critical piece in my resolving how divine determinism and human freedom are compatible. Since the reconciliation of divine determinism and human freedom is a major preoccupation of the book, it seemed apt to refer to this key to their reconciliation in the title. While my concept of God as the Most Real Being is not identical to that of the medieval philosophers, I like the title and have chosen to appropriate it here.

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## P R E F A C E

This book is a defense of divine determinism—belief in the unqualified, unrestricted sovereignty of God. Historically, this position has come to be associated with Calvinism and the Reformed tradition. I expect Calvinists to be largely sympathetic with my conclusions. Readers from outside the Reformed tradition will typically be unsympathetic. But it will help both groups to understand the following:

1. I am not a product of the Reformed tradition myself. I have never been a member of any fellowship with historical roots in Calvinism, and none of my spiritual training was particularly Calvinistic.
2. I do not now and never have agreed with the Calvinistic theological system in its entirety. Perhaps I should. Perhaps someday I will. But right now I believe that some of its tenets do not conform to the teaching of the Bible. I greatly respect the Calvinist tradition. It has much to teach us all. But I do not believe it is the last word in theology. Accordingly, this book is not a defense of Calvinism *per se*. It merely defends a particular doctrine that—as it happens—constitutes a fundamental distinctive of Calvinism. It is not a defense of the entire Calvinist system.
3. Even within the Calvinist tradition, the particular view of sovereignty I defend here will not find acceptance with all. Many self-identified Calvinists will consider my view extreme, problematic—perhaps even bizarre. I might be labeled a “hyper-Calvinist”—a four-letter word by anyone’s count.
4. Not coming out of a Reformed background, I do not hold my particular view of God’s sovereignty out of theological inertia. I became persuaded through biblical study and philosophical reflection. Specifically, I was persuaded by the very line of argument I expound in this book. My eventual persuasion came in spite of strong internal resistance to it. I began my journey with deeply ingrained prejudices against divine determinism—prejudices forged in me through many years of theological enculturation from a non-Reformed perspective.

My purpose in writing this book is two-fold: (1) I want to encourage the sympathetic Reformed reader to give some fresh thought to his exposition and defense of God’s sovereignty. Our culture needs a more bibli-

cally accurate and more rationally sound defense than it typically receives. (2) I want to challenge the opponent of the Reformed view of sovereignty to reconsider his position. Perhaps the Reformed tradition is right in its doctrine of divine sovereignty. I hope the unsympathetic reader will at least give me the opportunity to make my case. I further hope that, should the reader remain unpersuaded by my arguments, he will respect them enough to answer them, demonstrating how and where they fail. It would be regrettable if a reader dismisses this book as “hyper-Calvinist” after 10 pages, never seriously attempting to rebut its arguments.

Most who reject “hyper-Calvinism” do so on the grounds that its alleged implications are clearly and obviously false. If divine determinism does, in fact, imply that man has no free will, that God rather than man is culpable for evil, that man can do nothing about assuring his own salvation, and that human initiative is futile, then I would readily denounce it as a dangerous heresy. Such an unbiblical view would indeed have false and destructive implications and be deserving of the negative reaction the “hyper-Calvinist” label elicits. But the crux of the issue is whether these alleged objectionable implications are, in fact, necessitated by divine determinism. Many simply assume that they are, with no further thought given to the subject. Few have ever properly examined the question. In this book I reject the tacit cultural assumption that divine determinism entails this specific, identifiable set of false beliefs. One of my key contentions will be that divine determinism does not, in truth, imply any of the objectionable beliefs usually said to follow from it. I would hope, therefore, that my book accomplishes at least this much: to render “hyper-Calvinism” respectable and to secure for it a serious hearing. For far too long it has served as nothing more than a theological insult.

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I began this book nearly 19 years ago, in 1985. After completing a rough draft, my work was interrupted by graduate school and a number of other projects. The summer of 1999 was my first opportunity to return to this project in earnest, the summer of 2003 my first opportunity to resume again, and the summer of 2004 my opportunity to finally complete it. In the intervening years it received only brief and infrequent attention. The book is better, I think, for having sat those many years on the shelf. When I first began to consider it, divine determinism was a new and radically different paradigm that required a complete restructuring of my theological foundations. Graduate studies, further time for reflection,

opportunities to employ this new paradigm in my bible study, and increased familiarity with it have only served to increase my confidence that divine determinism is true.

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In this book I do not interact with the modern theological position sometimes referred to as “openness of God” theology. This theological position did not enter into public awareness until several years after I had finished the rough draft of this work. I decided not to change the structure of my book in order to interact directly with the issues raised by it. Indeed, I have not as yet had time to familiarize myself thoroughly with the position and its arguments. From what little I do know about openness of God theology, it would appear that, in most respects, my views are incompatible with it. But in one important respect my views concur with theirs: we both view the theology of mainstream evangelicalism as incoherent. We both argue that evangelicalism cannot logically believe in divine foreknowledge, even though it purports to do so. If the underlying assumptions of mainstream evangelical theology are taken to their logical conclusions, then one would have to conclude that God’s ability to foreknow the future is significantly handicapped. Openness theology embraces that conclusion, believing that God is severely limited in his foreknowledge. I reject it. The Bible teaches God’s unimpaired ability to foreknow the future. If modern evangelical theological assumptions are inconsistent with the Bible’s teaching in this regard, then the assumptions of modern evangelical theology need to be rejected. Openness theology takes the opposite tack. It accepts the theological assumptions of evangelicalism and simply takes them to their logical conclusion, rejecting what the Bible actually teaches.

There is a second significant omission in this book. While I am familiar with and prepared to interact with Jonathan Edwards’ arguments in his book *Freedom of the Will*, I have chosen not to do so here. While I respect Edwards’ position and his arguments, his views are not ultimately compatible with my own. Edwards, I would argue, defends divine determinism as an actuality mediated through a sort of natural determinism. Because I take the position that natural determinism, in all of its forms, is philosophically indefensible, being contrary to commonsensical notions of human freedom and responsibility, I must ultimately conclude that Edwards’ position is philosophically indefensible. The Arminians with whom Edwards is interacting do, at crucial junctures, raise valid philosophical objections to Edwards’ position. The strength of Edwards’ work

lies not at the level of his philosophical defense, it lies at the level of his clear and unyielding commitment to the teaching of the Bible. While his Arminian opponents are more faithful to sound philosophy, Edwards is more faithful to the Bible's teaching. Edwards has chosen the better of the two, but he has sacrificed rational coherence to do so. My view is that we must achieve both—rational coherence as well as biblical faithfulness. My contention is that the divine determinism I defend in this book does just that.

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Let me make a few suggestions to the reader who wants to sample the argument rather than tackle the entire work. Readers who already hold a high view of divine sovereignty as biblical may be able to profitably begin at chapter 9. However, I do introduce concepts and arguments in the initial eight chapters that may, in fact, be indispensable to adequately understanding the arguments in chapter 9 and following. Chapters 1, 4, and 6 may be particularly important. Also, the dialogue in Appendix L is a very concise summary of a substantial part of my argument.

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Many have encouraged me to simplify this book. I fully acknowledge that simplicity is desirable. And I have done what I can. But I lack that rare skill needed to make highly complex and intellectually challenging issues simple and readily accessible. Surviving my own intellectual battle with these issues was challenging enough. I fear that the even more challenging task of making my conclusions readily apparent and my arguments simple to follow is beyond my ability. Consequently, some portions of this book may prove to be tough sledding. I apologize. My sincere hope is that the effort will be worth it.

My earnest desire is that we might all come to see and understand God in all his glory, that we might come to see and understand him as the One in whom we live, and move, and have our being, that we might come to know God as the One who authors the entirety of cosmic reality from outside the reality in which we dwell, that we might come to know God as the *ens realissimus*, the most real being.

J. A. "Jack" Crabtree  
The Carriage House  
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While all the above have been personally supportive of me, and while this project would not have been possible without them, none of them can be blamed for the results. Their support has come without specific knowledge of the conclusions I was reaching in the course of my thought and writing. The result is my responsibility alone. I hope it does not come as an unpleasant surprise to any who have placed their confidence in me over these many years. My earnest desire has been to understand and articulate the truth about God. I hope that—by God's grace—I have in some small measure accomplished that.

# INTRODUCTION



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 CHAPTER ONE
 

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 DIVINE DETERMINISM:  
**What is it?**
**The Free Will–Sovereignty Dilemma**

This book explores the relationship of God to his creation. Every Christian familiar with the Bible knows and believes that God is the sovereign king, ruling over his creation. But sovereignty is a highly problematic and controversial concept. When we get specific about what sovereignty means—and what it entails—there is considerable disagreement. One man’s sovereign is another man’s cosmic wimp. And one man’s cosmic wimp is another man’s all-powerful, but self-restrained, king.

There are competing theories of God’s relationship to his creation. Any theory worth considering must somehow reconcile two realities: (i) the Bible’s contention that God is sovereign, and (ii) our commonsensical conviction that man is a free and responsible moral agent. Any serious proposal must do justice to both these facts. Controversy is the inevitable result, for divine sovereignty and human freedom seem utterly irreconcilable, and to reach agreement on how to reconcile the irreconcilable is difficult indeed. By all appearances, to affirm divine sovereignty is to deny, or at least to compromise, human freedom, and to fully affirm human freedom is to compromise divine sovereignty. Which should we do? People cannot agree.

Divine sovereignty, in current theological discussion, has come to mean divine power—the power God has to control reality.<sup>1</sup> The extent of God’s sovereignty is the extent of his control. To the extent that things are beyond his control, to that extent he is not sovereign. Hence, if human choice is beyond divine control, then God is not sovereign over human choice and divine sovereignty is limited by human freedom. By this sort

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1. So, for example, notice how H. B. Kuhn virtually equates sovereignty with omnipotence in his article on the sovereignty of God. Cf., H. B. Kuhn, “Sovereignty of God,” in vol. 5 of *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 468. Whether the concept of sovereignty within modern theological discussion conforms to the biblical concept of sovereignty is an interesting question, but it has no bearing on my point here. If “sovereignty” in the Bible does not mean the power to control, then we could conduct the debate using a different word. The issue is the dilemma between human freedom and the degree of divine control, whatever that control be called.

of reasoning, in order to affirm that God's sovereignty is absolute, one must affirm divine control over human choice. But if God controls human choice, then man is not strictly free, for he is not free from God. Divine sovereignty and human freedom appear to be mutually exclusive concepts.

This is the dilemma that has confronted Christians down through the ages. One cannot embrace equally the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man. What's a Christian to do?

### THREE SOLUTIONS TO THE FREE WILL–SOVEREIGNTY DILEMMA

Faced with this dilemma, Christians have offered very different solutions. Some, wanting to stay faithful to the Bible while honoring deeply felt intuitions, insist that both divine sovereignty and human freedom are to be affirmed with equal force.<sup>2</sup> They insist that neither concept qualify or limit the other. But we have already seen that—given the prevailing conceptions of sovereignty and free will—this is patently illogical. Its proponents fully acknowledge its illogicality, but they justify it in the name of “mystery.” The divine sovereignty–human freedom dilemma is a case of true “paradox.”<sup>3</sup>

Proponents of the second solution reject the notion of “paradox.” So, seeking to remain faithful to the Bible as they understand it, they refuse to compromise the sovereignty of God. To exempt human choice from God's sovereign control would deny what the Bible teaches—namely, that God rules the earth with unlimited, unqualified sovereignty. Accordingly, some who opt for this solution go so far as to deny the reality of man's free will. Free will is a philosophical fiction, not an authentic biblical concept. Others acknowledge the reality of free will, but they refuse to let this

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2. I do not cite any published examples of this or the solutions that follow. These solutions are not so much the domain of particular Christian philosophers, theologians, or schools of thought, but the domain of typical Christians sitting in typical church pews. They represent viewpoints that control the thinking of average individuals in the course of everyday discourse. As such, these proposals need not be so logically unassailable as the notions which we publish in books; for they are only advanced in casual everyday discussions by average Christians. Accordingly, some or all of these ideas have never made it into books. Nevertheless, these are the options that everyday people consider viable.

3. In the context of this solution to the divine sovereignty–human freedom dilemma, “paradox” and “mystery” apparently mean this: something that is true and ought to be believed even though it is utterly irrational to do so.

concession affect their theology in any way. They doggedly embrace the clear implications of God's absolute sovereignty, unqualified by the free will of man. While they give a nod to the reality of free will, for all practical purposes they deny it.

The majority of modern Christians are unwaveringly committed to certain foundational assumptions about God and reality that are believed to conflict with absolute sovereignty. They would rather reconsider and redefine the nature and extent of divine sovereignty than reject what is indubitably true. If absolute sovereignty negates human freedom, then so much the worse for absolute sovereignty. Human freedom is so clearly real that one would be a fool to deny it. We are not puppets, controlled and manipulated by God. So we must adjust our concept of divine sovereignty to leave room for undeniably real human freedom.

Neither can we jettison our belief in the perfect goodness of God. If God is in control of everything and is responsible for all that exists, then he is responsible for all the evil that exists in the world. But if God is responsible for evil, how can we affirm that he is good? Surely, to concede that God's sovereignty is limited is more reasonable than to jettison our conviction that God is perfectly good. God is sovereign, but only up to a point. Where the domain of God's sovereignty ends is where the evil in the world begins.

The proponents of this third solution do not agree on where to locate the limits of divine sovereignty. Some would draw the line at evil. God is responsible for the good in the world. He is not responsible for the evil. Others would draw the line at freewill choice. God is responsible for the physical, mechanical creation and all that happens within it. He is not responsible for freewill choices. Others would limit his control in both respects. He is in control of the good and morally neutral things that happen in the physical, mechanical world. But he is not responsible for any evil (Satan is), and he is not responsible for any freewill choices (good or bad).

## **MY SOLUTION TO THE FREE WILL–SOVEREIGNTY DILEMMA**

This book defends yet a fourth solution to the free will–sovereignty dilemma: DIVINE DETERMINISM. Divine determinism affirms that both terms of the dilemma are true without qualification: God is absolutely sovereign (even over the choices of men), and men truly do have free will and moral accountability. But unlike the second solution above, divine

determinism does not appeal to “paradox.” On the contrary, I will argue that absolute divine sovereignty and unqualified human accountability are—against all appearance—perfectly compatible. They can be reconciled in a way that is logical, comprehensible, and even commonsensical.

Understandably, divine determinism will ask us to significantly modify how we understand both divine sovereignty and free will. Divine sovereignty and human freedom are irreconcilable under the popular conceptions of each. But under the modified conceptions that I shall propose, they become perfectly compatible.

This solution is not strictly new. Others have affirmed both absolute divine sovereignty and absolute human freedom. And some of these have similarly refused to exalt irrationality under the banner of “mystery.” My purpose is to restate and defend this viewpoint afresh. I have found it compelling. I offer it anew for serious consideration. If I contribute anything original at all, it is but two things: (1) a fresh analogy that can help us grasp the rational compatibility of divine sovereignty and human freedom, and (2) a stronger, more confident affirmation that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are intellectually compatible and reconcilable in a way that is not beyond the grasp of human intellect.

## Defining Divine Determinism

### THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE DETERMINISM

If divine determinism claimed only that God has determinative control over his creation, then most, if not all, Christians would be divine determinists. Every Christian believes that God controls reality—within limits. But I will use the term more narrowly. By DIVINE DETERMINISM, I mean total, absolute divine control over the whole of reality. Divine determinism is the viewpoint that literally every detail of every aspect of everything that is or occurs in reality is caused and determined by God.<sup>4</sup>

According to divine determinism, God causes everything in the whole

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4. More familiarly, God’s role as the ultimate cause of all things is, I believe, couched in terms of his sovereignty—his absolute sovereignty. I choose to avoid the term ‘sovereignty’ for two reasons: (1) The term *sovereignty* is understood by different readers in a myriad of different ways. Readers will not necessarily agree on the implications of God’s being sovereign. Hence, to describe God as being totally sovereign may or may not convey the viewpoint that I am calling divine determinism. But, if I describe God as the absolute determiner and cause of all things, there can be no confusion as to what I believe is God’s relationship to reality. (2) *Sovereignty* is actually a relatively vague metaphorical term that does not communicate with enough philo-

of reality. Everything! Everything that exists, he has created. Everything that happens, he has caused to happen. Rocks, rivers, trees, flowers, birds, moose, or stars—they all owe the entire course of their existence to God. And so do men, angels, demons, and any other intelligent life in the cosmos—even Satan. God determines every thought, word, deed, desire, and choice. He determines the speed and location of every sub-atomic particle in the entire universe. Literally everything that occurs has resulted from his willing it into existence. Nothing can exist and nothing can occur apart from his causing it to be. This includes both good and evil. He has willed the good that is; he has willed the evil that is. He, and he alone, is ultimately responsible (and yet entirely without blame) for the existence of every evil deed.<sup>5</sup> This is the doctrine I am advancing in this book.

Any viewpoint that, in contrast to divine determinism, sets boundaries on the extent of God's determinative control I will label LIMITED DETERMINISM. Different varieties of limited determinism exist.<sup>6</sup> Each would draw slightly different boundaries to mark what God does and does not determine. Some argue that God determines the affairs of the impersonal universe but not the choices of men and angels. Others maintain that God determines the good that occurs but never evil. For the purposes of this book, I will consider all of these different views under the one category of limited determinism. LIMITED DETERMINISM is, of course, a shorthand reference to limited DIVINE determinism<sup>7</sup> in contrast to absolute or unlimited DIVINE determinism.

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sophical precision to sort out the important issues involved in this discussion. When the Bible speaks of God's sovereignty, it is not with this particular discussion in mind. Its purpose is to exalt God as the ruler, judge, and controller of all history. But questions of how God controls history and to exactly what extent he controls history are generally not the immediate concern. For our more specialized purposes, we need a more precise term.

5. As should eventually become clear, I do not question God's goodness. Though he is responsible for the existence of evil—as he is for everything that exists—he is not culpable for any particular evils that occur. I will argue this in detail in Part Four. I insist, without contradiction, that God is a perfectly good being with a completely unsullied character even though he has created the evil that is in the world. I would hope that those who respond with strong negative emotion to the suggestion that God is the ultimate cause of evil will hear me out. I am no less committed than they to the doctrine of God's moral perfection. If I thought for one second that divine determinism compromises God's moral purity, I would reject it summarily.

6. See appendix A for an understanding of how divine determinism relates to all the various alternative theories regarding the ultimate determinative causes of reality.

7. By LIMITED DETERMINISM I do not mean any form of determinism whatsoever that is limited in its extent. I use LIMITED DETERMINISM to specify DIVINE determinism that is limited in its extent.

## THE DOCTRINE OF NATURAL DETERMINISM

At various points throughout this book I will refer to a counter-theory that I call NATURAL DETERMINISM. Natural determinism is the theory that *nature* is responsible for everything that is and everything that occurs.<sup>8</sup> Everything that exists and everything that happens is because of the inevitable outworking of the laws of physics. Therefore, everything happens out of physical and mechanical necessity. This includes not only natural phenomena like rain, wind, earthquakes, and weeds, but human behavior as well. If I order a raspberry milkshake rather than a cup of coffee, I do so because the laws of physics required it. I turned left at the corner rather than right because the physiology of my brain required it. Everything is caused by the physical universe, of which we are a part. Everything moves unyieldingly forward in strict observance of the natural laws. Nothing moves at all except by the mechanical outworking of those laws.<sup>9</sup>

Divine and natural determinism are very different theories. They are not allies; they are in direct opposition to one another. I don't mean in the obvious sense that divine determinism nominates God to be in charge while natural determinism nominates nature. More importantly, they have significantly different implications for human freedom and responsibility. It is in consequence of these very different implications that natural determinism is intellectually flawed while divine determinism is rationally compelling. I shall explain these important differences in due course, but we must be clear that these are significantly different theories having radically different implications. The truly objectionable implications of natural determinism should not be used as our excuse for rejecting divine determinism. Far too often, divine determinism is repudiated because natural determinism is unconvincing. We must permit divine determinism to make its case on its own terms and not be declared guilty by the evidence against natural determinism.

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8. See appendix A.

9. Two well-known natural determinists would be B. F. Skinner and Carl Sagan. Cf., for example, B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*.

## What's a Nice Arminian Like Me Doing in a Place Like This?

I have become a convinced divine determinist only quite recently. Divine determinism is completely foreign to the theological tradition and culture in which I was nurtured. My earliest theological reflections were solidly along limited determinist lines.

The transformation of my thinking has been—especially in its early stages—slow and gradual. It was virtually imperceptible to me. The more my biblical and theological understanding matured, the more intellectually dissatisfied I became with limited determinism. Eventually, as I grappled with the teaching of *Romans*, I was consciously and deliberately compelled to adopt a different theological paradigm. But a gradually dawning awareness that limited determinism was inadequate had plagued me for several years before that.

I presume, of course, that the theological understanding defended in this book is the result of my theological reflections finally coming of age, finally reaching maturity. (And I *do* mean maturity, not perfection.) Whether I am right about that is ultimately something each reader must decide for himself. Embracing divine determinism may be evidence of my theological senility, not my theological maturity. But in any case, I offer my thoughts in good faith. Justifiably or not, I am confident that divine determinism is the only theory that does justice to all the philosophical and biblical data. It alone captures the true nature of God's relationship to his creation.

While it would be too tedious—and perhaps impossible—to reconstruct all the factors that contributed to my dissatisfaction with and eventual rejection of limited determinism, two autobiographical highlights are worth mentioning.

As a university undergraduate, I attended an evangelistic meeting sponsored by a well-known campus ministry. A non-believer in the audience employed the argument from evil as part of his justification for not believing. The argument from evil states that, in view of the nature and extent of the evil that exists in the world, to believe that a good God exists is unreasonable. Confident that I was right, I waxed eloquent about how the emergence of evil was a necessary risk that God took. God did not create humans to be mere robots, I argued. He wanted to create free-will creatures whose love and obedience would be meaningful because it was voluntary rather than a pre-programmed response. So God created man with

free will. But in doing so, he necessarily had to risk the possibility of evil. In a free-will creature, the possibility of evil—even its eventual inevitability—goes with the territory. God could not make man free without creating the possibility of rebellion and evil.

When I had finished, a theologically astute staff member questioned me, “Jack, do you think we will have free will in heaven?”

“Sure, I presume so.”

“Do you think that in heaven there will be any possibility of our rebelling against God all over again?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“So you can conceive of at least one place where God can have the voluntary, freely-given love and obedience of his creatures without its involving the possibility of sin and rebellion?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“Then why couldn’t he have created us that way from the beginning? Why couldn’t he have created us capable of offering voluntary love and obedience without the possibility of sin—just like you say it will be in heaven? Why couldn’t he have created us from the start the way we are going to be in the end?”

That was an uncomfortable conversation. I understood that he had undermined my whole argument (not to mention my pride). My whole solution to the problem of evil had been decimated. I felt rebuked, embarrassed, unsettled, and strangely perplexed. The sting of the rebuke and embarrassment passed. In time, more adequate solutions to the problem of evil presented themselves and my faith became settled on firmer foundations. But I never really got over the perplexity that came upon me that night.

How is it conceivable that in heaven we will be perfectly free to choose and yet, at the same time, it will be impossible for us to choose evil? How am I to imagine a place where being free and being secure in sinless perfection are not mutually exclusive? Nothing in my theory of limited determinism, founded as it was on the absolute autonomy of the human will, could make any sense out of such a possibility. If man’s will is autonomous from God, to affirm necessary obedience with no possibility of rebellion is utterly illogical. But somehow, intuitively, it made sense. For that is exactly what lies ahead for the believer: being secure in perfect, voluntary obedience with no possibility of rebellion. According to my limited determinist perspective, this shouldn’t make sense. Yet it did. I was perplexed.



Only later, in divine determinism, did I finally find a resolution to my quandary. I didn't give it much conscious attention, but my subconscious presumably cranked away over the years, seeking a solution. Finally, the light went on: *God can control my free will and guarantee its obedience because the human will is not autonomous!* It took me years to reach this simple conclusion. The dogma of human autonomy—a theological legacy handed down from past generations—ran deep and strong in me and was not easily discarded. And once I discarded it, it took still longer to get comfortable with the new perspective. It was such a radically different way of thinking about myself.

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The second significant event came from reading *The Meaning of the City* by Jacques Ellul.<sup>10</sup> Ellul traces the Scriptural references to cities in order to establish a biblical perspective on the city as an institution.

He points out that the first city was built by the murderer Cain in an act of distrust and unbelief. Though God had promised protection to the desperately fearful Cain, Cain did not trust God. Instead, he built the first city (a fortified city) to provide protection for himself. From this, Ellul concludes that the city, from its inception, is strictly a product of human sinfulness and unbelief. When man was banished from the garden, he built a city in which to dwell—a place created out of his own restless rebellion. Ellul expounds a series of biblical passages in support of his thesis: the city is an evil institution, seething with man's rebelliousness.

But then we come to the book of *Revelation*. When God is making everything new, we find a very curious fact: the believer's eternal dwelling place is a city! The city being what it is, we would fully expect restoration to the garden to be man's heavenly reward. We would expect the city—born of human rebellion and brimming with evil—to be destroyed. We would hardly expect God to honor man's free rebellious choice to create the city. But that is exactly what we find. Eternity is represented as the New Jerusalem. Granted, the city that shall descend out of heaven will be untouched by human hands, but it will be a city nonetheless.

The implications of this were revolutionary. God's grace is more incredible and mysteriously wonderful than I had ever imagined. God, in his love, will take the natural consequences of a man's choices—even his evil ones—and give them back to him as his *perfect* inheritance. What a rad-

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10. Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970).

ical thought! God's grace is such that even my sinful choices do not and cannot prevent me from gaining the perfect inheritance God has destined for me. In other words, *God's grace cannot be hindered!* It will be victorious even over my rebellion. It does not come as an offer, requiring my cooperation. It comes as my conqueror. If God has determined to show me kindness, then kindness I will get. Nothing—not even I—can stop him. If I rebel against him and refuse to cooperate with his purposes, then—much to my puzzled delight—I eventually discover that the consequences of those rebellious choices were a part of the reward he had in store for me all along. This truth revolutionized my whole theology: *God's grace cannot be hindered!*

Ellul's book was only the beginning of this discovery. Over the next several years I sought to clearly understand the gospel itself through a study of *Romans*. What began as a hopeful suggestion made by Ellul grew into a firm conviction. Every advance in my understanding of the Bible pointed in the same direction: *God's grace cannot be hindered!*

This discovery created serious problems for my view of divine sovereignty. The invincibility of God's grace was in irreconcilable tension with my limited determinist belief in the autonomy of the human will. If the human will is autonomous and beyond divine control, how can God's grace be unhinderable? Given my freedom, surely I could—through foolish and rebellious choices—sabotage the reward God had destined for me. God cannot guarantee the fulfillment of his purposes unless he completely controls the outcome of my choices. On limited determinist assumptions he does not. My choices are mine to make. Logically, if I am truly independent of divine control, I can thwart God's purposes. Yet the Bible teaches the opposite, I discovered—*God's grace cannot be hindered*. I faced a dilemma: either I must deny the clear teaching of Scripture, or I must reconsider how the human will is related to God. But I could not, in good faith, ignore the logical tension that had been created by my discovery. Both cannot be true. Either the human will is not autonomous, or the grace of God can be hindered. Something would have to give.

Ultimately, I had no real choice. My commitment to limited determinism and the notion of human autonomy had to go. The autonomy of the human will had been the non-negotiable foundation of my entire theological system. Now I was forced to discard it and shift to a different foundation—the absolute determinative control of God. My whole theological system had to adjust accordingly. This book is an examination of the kinds of considerations that changed my mind and shaped my theology as I recast it around a new center: God.

## Preview of Argument

### PART ONE

Our discussion begins with some important introductory concerns. Surveying the most important practical ramifications of divine determinism, chapter 2 demonstrates that whether or not divine determinism is true is not a merely academic question. We seek an answer not to satisfy some esoteric, philosophical curiosity. It is an issue of vital, personal concern.

Chapter 3 briefly argues that reason is the arbiter of truth. Logic (or reason) is foundational to my defense of divine determinism. The validity of my defense hinges on whether logic is a reliable guide to truth. If the reader will not grant to reason and logic the authority to establish truth, then my argument is defeated before it begins. Chapter 3 explains why granting this sort of authority to reason is appropriate. If the reader is already convinced that reason establishes truth—even the truth about God, he can skip chapter 3 without loss.

Finally, chapter 4 explores three concepts that are sufficiently important to the subsequent discussion that they need careful definition. The specifics of my exploration of these concepts are critical to understanding the arguments I advance later.

### PART TWO

In part 2, I make my case for divine determinism from the biblical evidence. I argue that divine determinism is logically required by two important biblical doctrines: (1) God as the creator of everything out of nothing, and (2) God as the one who foreknows the future. Since two distinct tenets of the Bible's explicit teaching require it, it is reasonable to conclude that divine determinism underlies all that the Bible teaches.

### PART THREE

In part 3, I make a brief argument for divine determinism from a strictly philosophical point of view. Namely, if we are to have a sound logical foundation for the most basic, indubitable assumptions at the foundation of human knowledge and experience, divine determinism is required.

Part 3 is brief—merely indicating the direction that a philosophical defense might take. I have assumed that the reader is a Christian believer who grants authority to the Bible and will, therefore, be convinced by what it teaches. My overall argument, therefore, concentrates on what is biblically required, not on what is philosophically required. My primary

purpose in part 3 is to suggest that philosophy and the Bible are in agreement on this point.

#### **PART FOUR**

Part 4 is perhaps the most important part of my presentation. There I give attention to the objections popularly raised against divine determinism. I argue that the common objections to divine determinism, though superficially compelling, are, in truth, not rationally compelling at all. They are based on a crucially mistaken assumption.

#### **PART FIVE**

Part 5 summarizes the argument and makes some final observations. In light of the fact that compelling biblical and philosophical reasons to embrace divine determinism exist, and in light of the fact that no compelling arguments against it exist, divine determinism ought to be embraced as true. It is the only rationally coherent theory of the creator's relationship to his creation. Hence, it is incumbent upon us, as rational beings, to embrace it.