

## I BELIEVE IN GOD'S SELF-SUFFICIENCY: A RESPONSE TO THOMAS MCCALL

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Tom McCall and I share a belief in God's aseity. This odd word refers to God's self-existence (*a*-from, *se*-oneself). God exists "from himself." God owes his existence and completeness as God to nothing outside himself. I am thankful to Tom McCall for pressing me to clarify my understanding of God's aseity. He thinks that my understanding of God implicitly, if not explicitly, denies this important truth.

I should simply confess at the outset that I have written sentences that by themselves could lead one to McCall's criticism. What I hope to do here is explain what I meant and how those sentences carry my intended meaning in their context. I hope to try to write more carefully about this in the future.

The question of aseity arises for me because a huge part of my theological burden is the answer to the question why God created the universe. I recall wrestling in the Spring of 1971 in a class at Fuller Seminary with the dilemma of, on the one hand, thinking of God's creation as purposeful (and therefore giving the impression that he depended on the accomplishment of that purpose to be complete or happy) or, on the other hand, thinking of God's creation as unpurposeful (and therefore, apparently, whimsical and capricious). In the first case, we would sacrifice his aseity. In the second, we would sacrifice his wisdom.

I point this out to emphasize how difficult this problem is for *all* of us. The problem is not unique to only one theological tradition. As with most important doctrines, we are trying to say true biblical things about one aspect of God's reality (joyful self-sufficiency apart from creation), without denying other true biblical things about another aspect of his reality (purposeful wisdom in creation). I certainly affirm both of these truths.

In my book *Desiring God*, written for a popular audience and first published in 1986, I ventured to say it like this:

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In creation, God “went public” with the glory that reverberates joyfully between the Father and the Son. There is something about the fullness of God’s joy that inclines it to overflow. There is an expansive quality to His joy. It wants to share itself. The impulse to create the world was not from weakness, as though God were lacking in some perfection that creation could supply. “It is no argument of the emptiness or deficiency of a fountain, that it is inclined to overflow.”<sup>1</sup>

I still want to affirm as strongly as I can that God’s act of creation was not constrained by anything outside him, nor was the inner impulse to create owing to deficiency or defect. I agree with McCall that one of the magnificent things about the Trinitarian reality of God is that it provides the secret to God’s eternal love and his joyful self-sufficiency. In God himself, the three Persons of the Trinity are fully satisfied in the joy of their fellowship. This is implied in the Bible’s statement “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). God does not need us or anything else outside himself to be God or to be happy. Creation does not complete God.

Tom McCall and I both affirm this. And yet, perhaps paradoxically, we would both say that God also delights in creation (Ps 104:31) and redemption (Zeph 3:17). In other words, having created the world and redeemed his people through Jesus Christ, God takes pleasure in these works. His satisfaction in the Trinitarian fellowship does not make it impossible for him to delight in that which is not God. How he can do this without being an idolater is one of the main questions I have written about over the years.<sup>2</sup> But whatever the answer to that question is, what I am pointing out here is that Tom McCall and I do not infer from God’s delights in creation and redemption that he was not God, or was not supremely happy in the Trinity before he created the world. In other words, God created the world for a reason, whatever that was, and in creating and redeeming, he finds delight in his works. I think McCall and I are together so far.

McCall’s most ultimate statement about God’s motive in creation—and I agree with it—is as follows:

It is *from* this essential divine love that God acts, and we should understand divine action in accordance with the nature of God as Triune holy love. It is *from* the freedom of this love that God creates, and it is *from* the sheer, utter, inexhaustible goodness of this love that God sustains and saves.

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<sup>1</sup>John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, Oreg.: Multnomah, 2003), 44. The quotation about the fountain is from Jonathan Edwards, *The End For Which God Created the World*, which is printed in full in John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 165.

<sup>2</sup>My most extended effort to show how this is compatible with God’s aseity is John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God* (Sisters, Oreg.: Multnomah, 2000).

The italics in those sentences are mine. God acts, creates, sustains, and saves *from* the freedom of his love. I call attention to these three uses of *from* to point out that a deeper problem of creation is concealed in these words. These sentences are true, and I affirm them with McCall. But the word *from* implies movement outward “from” love to creation. And the question of *how* love produces this movement outward in creation is not yet explained in McCall’s essay.

One problem concealed in those words is this: How does love account for creation, if God foreknows the horrors that are coming and creates anyway? There are answers to such questions. But they are very difficult to articulate in a way that honors all the biblical evidence. That is what I have been trying to do for the last thirty years or so. And I believe that is what Tom McCall is aiming at as well. With all that agreement, why does McCall think I have surrendered God’s self-existence?

The reason McCall thinks I have surrendered God’s aseity is, first, that I have answered the question of why God created the world by saying he did it to display his glory; and, second, that I have then gone on to say that this display of God’s glory is constitutive of God’s being. The first is accurate. The second looks accurate (as I confessed) but isn’t.

This is the heart of McCall’s critique. He thinks that I teach that God’s action in creation is needed for God to be God. For example, he says,

First, we need to see that what we can call “maximal glorification” is essential to God. Piper says that “God’s glory and his name consist fundamentally in his propensity to show mercy and his sovereign freedom in its distribution.” As Piper puts it “more precisely, it is the glory of God and his essential nature mainly to dispense mercy (but also wrath, Ex 34:7) on whomever he pleases, apart from any constraint originating outside his will. This is the essence of what it means to be God.”

Thus McCall infers:

It seems, then, that God would be *imperfect* were it not for the exercise and display of these attributes. . . . For Piper (following Fuller and Edwards), for God to be who he is, God must display the full range of his attributes.

In response, I affirm clearly that God was fully God with no deficiencies before he created the world and before he displayed anything to anyone but himself in the fellowship of the Trinity. No, God was not *imperfect* before he displayed his mercy to human beings.

The problem I created for McCall is that I did not make clear enough the relational limits of my statement “This is the essence of what it means to be God.” The word *this* in that sentence refers to

God's dispensing mercy (and wrath) on whomever he pleases apart from any constraint originating outside his will. So McCall concludes that I am saying God's eternal essence consists partly in God's freely showing wrath and mercy in creation. Hence God's essence depends on creation. Hence God's aseity is surrendered.

But that is not what I have ever believed or ever meant. Nor do I think what I *do* believe necessarily leads to the undermining of God's aseity. To bring out the relational limits of what I intended, here are the problem sentences with my bracketed, italicized explanations.

First, we need to see that what we can call "maximal glorification" is essential to God. [It is essential to God as he is acting in creation; that is, if and when he creates, he will create with this motive, or he is not God in creating. It's like saying, God's treating sinners with love is essential to his being God, because God is love. We would not mean that the existence of sinners is necessary for God to be love.] Piper says that "God's glory and his name consist fundamentally in his propensity to show mercy and his sovereign freedom in its distribution." [Notice the key words "propensity" and "freedom." These are central to God's glory. These were present in God eternally. Creation did not bring about God's propensity to show mercy or his freedom to distribute it as he pleases. The external acts of mercy came with creation, but the propensity and freedom to act this way are eternal in God.] As Piper puts it "more precisely, it is the glory of God and his essential nature mainly to dispense mercy (but also wrath, Ex 34:7) on whomever he pleases, apart from any constraint originating outside his will. [That is, when "the glory of God" or his "essential nature" expresses itself in creation and redemption and judgment, this is the way it happens: mercy (and wrath) happen in divine freedom, not constrained by external control or internal defect.] This is the essence of what it means to be God [in the act of creation].

To clarify further: God was fully God *before* there was any universe and *before* his mercy and grace and wrath could be displayed in creation. But when he created the world, these were the expressions of his glory and his nature and his name. So it does not contradict God's aseity to say that *in the act of creation and redemption<sup>3</sup> and judgment it is* God's nature and glory and name to act freely in the display of grace and wrath.

This is my main clarification. To repeat: When I say, "To dispense mercy and wrath with no constraint from outside his will is

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<sup>3</sup>When I speak of the display of God's glory in "redemption," I have in mind chiefly the glory of God's grace displayed when Christ died. I put the stress here, first, because Paul speaks of salvation beginning in God's purpose "before the foundation of the world" and moving through predestination to adoption "through Jesus Christ"—all of this "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (Eph 1:5–6)—and, second, because Paul calls the gospel of Christ crucified "the gospel of the glory of Christ." The pinnacle of God's glory is manifest in his grace, and, against our expectations, the pinnacle of his grace is manifest in the death of his Son.

what it means to be God," I don't mean that the fallen creation must exist for God to be God. Neither do I mean that God is not God until he acts mercifully in creation. I mean that in relating to the fallen creation, *being God means he will relate to it this way*—in freedom from external control.

One last attempt to clarify with an analogy: Suppose my daughter and I are watching Tiger Woods play golf. His drive takes a bad bounce and lands in the rough with an almost unplayable lie. In order to par the hole, he will have to overcome the rough and slice the ball around a tree to get it on the green. He steps down into the gully, and with one leg up and the other down, he hits the ball not only around the tree and onto the green, but within 12 inches of the cup. I turn to my daughter and say, "That is what it means to be Tiger Woods."

This is the way we use language. Nobody thinks I mean: The existence of Tiger Woods depends on that shot. Everyone knows what I mean: The essence of Tiger Woods's prowess as a golfer was expressed in that shot. So when I look at God's freedom in showing mercy and wrath ("He has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills," Rom 9:18), I say: "That is what it means to be God." I don't mean he wasn't God before he acted in mercy. I mean in acting that way he is expressing the essence of what it means to be God.

Therefore, it is not true to say that I believe, or imply, that God must actualize his mercy in order to be God, or that God must create the world in order to be complete as God. McCall writes, "If God is not maximally glorified, then God is not God (from Piper's theology)." What he means by this is what I have tried to show I don't mean. What I *would* mean, if I said, "For God to be God he must be maximally glorified," is this: "In creating and redeeming the world *seeking to be maximally glorified is the way God's Godness will incline him to do it.*" But doing it that way does not make him God or constitute his Godness. He was God before he did that. It is precisely because he is fully God that his being God inclines him to fully display his glory.

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The last part of McCall's article that I will respond to is his criticism of my exegesis of Rom 9:22–23. Paul says, "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory" (Rom 9:22–23 ESV).

I think this is Paul's most ultimate expression of why the present universe exists the way it does. And his answer is: "God desires to show his wrath and make known his power." This is not the only

answer. But it is enormously important in accounting for many things. McCall says that even though I construe the participle causally (“because God desired to show . . .”), this doesn’t make good sense: “But this is hard to even make sense of; as Ben Witherington III notes, such a statement is ‘difficult to imagine.’ So far as I can see, Piper offers no explanation here.”

McCall is mistaken in saying the causal reading of the participle *desiring* “doesn’t make good sense.” It makes perfect sense, especially in the context where God endured Pharaoh through ten plagues and says, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you” (Rom 9:17). Moreover, Paul has made clear in Rom 2:4 that God’s patience (μακροθυμία in both 2:4 and 9:22) compounds his judgment when it is resisted. So to endure with patience those who are hardened against God makes perfect sense, if God’s aim is to “show his wrath and make known his power.”<sup>4</sup>

McCall also disagrees with construing the participle *prepared* (κατηρτισμένα) as passive in Paul’s phrase “vessels . . . prepared for destruction” (Rom 9:22). McCall does not argue for a meaning that makes better sense of the context, but criticizes the passive construction, and says that my arguments are inadequate. Then he concludes: “But so far as I can see, Piper’s argument only works if it is indeed a passive. Thus his entire theological project hangs on a fairly slender exegetical thread at this point.”

Whether my “entire theological project” hangs on one word in one verse, the readers of my books and sermons may judge. But rather than lengthen this article, I will simply refer the reader to the section in *The Justification of God*, titled “Fitted for Destruction” (pp. 211–14), where I think the contextual considerations are decisive for the passive rendering of κατηρτισμένα.<sup>5</sup>

McCall’s persuasion that my theology undermines the aseity of God is not unique to him. James Beilby has leveled the same criticism against Edwardsian-Calvinism.<sup>6</sup> I happily see myself in that category—Edwardsian-Calvinism—since I think it reflects biblical truth faithfully. Walter Schultz has answered Beilby in an essay that argues,

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<sup>4</sup>McCall’s statement, “So far as I can see, Piper offers no explanation here,” is puzzling. He is referring to my book *The Justification of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993). On pages 207–10, in a section titled “God’s Patience With the Vessels of Wrath,” I offer numerous explanations how to make sense of God’s enduring patiently the vessels of wrath made for destruction—including several crucial contextual observations as well as three extra-biblical parallels. I will post this section online at <http://tinyurl.com/gods-patience>, so that the reader without access to the book can view it here.

<sup>5</sup>This section is available online at <http://tinyurl.com/fitted-for-destruction>.

<sup>6</sup>James Beilby, “Divine Aseity, Divine Freedom: A Conceptual Problem for Edwardsian-Calvinism,” *JETS* 47/4 (December, 2004): 647–58.

Inexhaustible fullness of intra-Trinitarian life—out of value for itself—creates and redeems nothing-based beings to exist eternally solely by virtue of and for partaking in that life. This is the epitome of love.<sup>7</sup>

### CONCLUSION

McCall is absolutely right to be jealous for the doctrine of the self-existence and self-sufficiency of God. I join him in that jealousy. I hope my clarifications will enable him to feel my arm linked with his in the defense of God's aseity.

I know that he raised numerous other issues about my belief in the all-governing providence of God.<sup>8</sup> I continue to do the best I can, in the limits of my life and ability, to explain and defend this view from the Bible. I think I have given answers to all of McCall's concerns in numerous other places, so that to offer them again here would go beyond what I have time to do.

I am sure I have not given the last word on this matter. So I continue to read and think and preach and write and try to submit to Scripture as I deal with the pains and pleasures of my church. For now I think the wisest thing to do in response to these other concerns McCall raises would be to send the reader to my most recent effort to show the biblical foundation for God's purposefully governing all things (including sin), namely, the book *Spectacular Sins: And Their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ*.<sup>9</sup>

As far as I can tell, McCall and I face a similar challenge: We believe that God foresaw all the horrors that would come in the creation of the world, but he created the world anyway. Therefore, we both feel a theological and pastoral burden to give an account for why God would do that. McCall's paper does not spell out his answer to that question. He says God created "from the freedom of love." Yes. But how does love account for choosing to create a world that God knew would end up with this much sin and pain?

I suppose his answer is that God willed *something* beyond sin and pain that was so valuable this world was worth it. That is my answer too. Where we disagree is what this *something* is. My answer

<sup>7</sup>Walter Schultz, "Jonathan Edwards's End of Creation: An Exposition and Defense," JETS 49/2 (June, 2006): 269. Also available at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3817/is\\_200606/ai\\_n17176287/pg\\_21](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3817/is_200606/ai_n17176287/pg_21) (accessed 8-18-08).

<sup>8</sup>My view is summed up in the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 27:

Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. God's providence is His almighty and ever present power [1], whereby, as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures [2], and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty [3], indeed, all things, come not by chance [4], but by His fatherly hand [5].

[1] Jer 23:23, 24; Acts 17:24-28. [2] Heb 1:3. [3] Jer 5:24; Acts 14:15-17; John 9:3; Prov 22:2. [4] Prov 16:33. [5] Matt 10:29.

<sup>9</sup>John Piper, *Spectacular Sins: And Their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

is that this *something* God willed is the display of the fullness of his glory for the enjoyment of his people, or as Paul says, "to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy" (Rom 9:23). God's aseity is the foundation of that conviction, not an obstacle to it.

#### A PASTORAL EPILOGUE

One pastoral word as I close. Tom McCall is right to draw attention to the shocking effect of some of the truths I affirm about the sovereignty of God. I find many things in the Bible which at first are shocking. I think that is inevitable given the infinite difference between the Creator and the creature. But I do not rush to press people to believe all the hard things I believe without regard to their own conscience.

I do not want someone to believe that God is evil, or that God ever sinned. So if my affirmation that God wills that sin come to pass (for example, the murder of his Son, Acts 4:27-28, Isa 53:10), or that God wills that people die of starvation (Jer 11:22), requires of someone that they believe in their hearts that God sins or that God is evil, then I say to them, "Do not yet believe what I say. Your conscience forbids it. You dare not believe statements about God which, according to your own conscience, can only mean that God is what he is not. Continue to pray and study. Either you or I (or both of us) will be changed in due time."

I hope this way of commending hard truth has something of the spirit of Paul in it when he said, "If in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you" (Phil 3:15).