

I BELIEVE IN DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

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I. INTRODUCTION

I believe in the sovereignty of God. I believe that Scripture, in various genres and by way of diverse speech-acts, plainly and forcefully declares that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Scripture clearly teaches this truth, and the Christian tradition—East as well as West, patristic and medieval as well as Reformation and modern—has with gladness of heart affirmed it as well: the God of Anselm, Irenaeus, and John (Chrysostom, Damascene, Calvin, or Wesley) is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

With the great company of the saints, I understand any acceptable doctrine of divine sovereignty to include (at least) these elements: (a) God is omnipotent, (b) God is *a se*, and (c) God is providentially active in governing and judging the world without being in any way threatened by it. So far, so good: I hope that no orthodox Christian could find much with which to disagree or complain. Nonetheless, the doctrine of divine sovereignty is often a flashpoint of theological controversy, and much of this controversy concerns the proper explanation of (c)—God's providential governance of the world is the point of no small disagreement and contention.

In this essay I discuss one very (recently) influential theological account of God's sovereign governance of the world. I argue that, completely contrary to its noble intentions, such a formulation of the doctrine of sovereign governance actually *undercuts* another key component of the doctrine of divine sovereignty: aseity. I suggest that, given the problems with the common view, other alternatives are worthy of further exploration.

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II. DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AS DIVINE DETERMINISM

Some theologians (mostly in the broadly “Reformed” tradition) promote and defend a doctrine of divine sovereignty which may be summarized as *S* and which includes both

S: God is sovereign over any event *E* if and only if God determines that *E* occurs¹

and

S’: God is sovereign over any agent *A* if and only if God determines all of *A*’s actions²

as essential to the doctrine. Especially within the resurgence of recent Calvinism among evangelical Christians, belief in *S* is as dearly cherished as it is widely held—which is to say, *very*.³

But with *S* comes a great host of difficult questions. When such an account of the meaning of divine sovereignty is coupled with the (proper) affirmation that God is sovereign over everything that is not God, then we are faced with the undeniable conclusion that everything that ever happens—all events that occur and all actions performed—is determined to occur, and in fact is determined to occur in exact accordance with the decreed will of God. While some theologians may find this cause for celebration, such celebration should be tempered quickly by the difficult questions that immediately come with such affirmations. Consider, by way of example, problems generated for this account of divine sovereignty from horrific natural and moral evil. If *S* is the proper account of divine sovereignty, and if God indeed is sovereign over everything, then it is undeniable that exactly all the horrific events of human history are ultimately due to God’s will. Why do tsunamis rise up and send walls of water through unprepared and largely defenseless communities, leaving behind in their wake hundreds of thousands of dead, with beaches littered with the broken and lifeless bodies of young children, shattered families, and grief-stricken loved ones?

¹I here (and throughout) rely upon standard definitions of determinism. What I say here about determinism includes both “hard” and “soft” determinism (or “compatibilism,” the view that freedom and determinism are compatible). For more on standard definitions of determinism (especially as these relate to theological issues), see, e.g., Keith Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 361; William Hasker, *Metaphysics: Constructing a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983), 32; Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974), 38-57; J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 268; Kelly James Clark, Richard Lints, and James K. A. Smith, *101 Key Terms in Philosophy and Their Importance for Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 30-31.

²I say “any agent *A*” (rather than “any person *P*”) to both include non-human agents (such as angels and demons), just in case those other agents do not fulfill the necessary conditions of personhood.

³On the resurgence of Calvinism among younger evangelicals, see Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

For the proponent of *S*, the ultimate answer is clear: these things happen because God determines that these things will happen, and indeed that they will happen exactly as God wants them to happen. Why does the father of a beautiful five-year-old daughter take her from her kindergarten class and smother the life from her? Again, for the proponent of *S*, the ultimate answer is clear: this happens because God determines that it will happen, and that it will happen exactly as it did happen. After any appeals to “secondary causality” might be made, for the Christian who holds to *S*, the answer is clear and unavoidable: if everything is determined, and if God determines everything (even if he determines it via secondary causality), then these things too are determined by God.

Or think of issues related to predestination and reprobation. Why is it that some sinners are saved and other sinners are damned? Of course the proponents of *S* will (rightly) say many things about sin and grace (the reprobate are damned because of their sin and the saints are saved because of grace), but behind all such statements is this ultimate explanation: some sinners are saved because God determines their salvation, and other sinners are damned because God determines that they indeed will be damned. But consider:

- 1) God truly loves all persons.
- 2) Truly to love someone is to desire her well-being and to promote her true flourishing as much as you can.
- 3) The true well-being and flourishing of all persons is to be found in a right relationship with God, a saving relationship in which we accept the invitation of the gospel and come to love and obey him.
- 4) God could determine all persons freely to accept the invitation of the gospel and come to a right relationship and be saved.
- 5) Therefore, all persons will be saved.⁴

Traditional Calvinists will agree that (5) is directly contrary to Scripture. But since (5) follows from (1) – (4), then there seems to be a problem here.⁵ (Of course the obvious solution is to deny [4], but to do so would be to deny *S*.⁶)

⁴For this formulation I am indebted to Jerry L. Walls, “John Wesley on Predestination and Election,” in *Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (ed. William J. Abraham; Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁵I don’t mean to suggest that this is an *unfamiliar* problem to proponents of *S*, and I am not unaware of the major types of responses to it: one might effectively deny (1) (thus saying that the apparently universal passages of Scripture must refer to “all kinds of” or “everyone who is elect”), or one might appeal to the notion that there are “two wills in God” (more on which anon).

⁶Or, at least, the soft determinist or compatibilist versions of *S*.

Or, if such considerations fail to trouble the sensibilities of the “young and Reformed,” think further of issues related to sanctification. Why, for instance, do some Christians still struggle with particular sexual sins? Why do they occasionally fall prey to such temptations? Why do they leave in their wake shattered trust and broken hearts? Again, for the Christian who believes *S* to be the proper account of divine sovereignty and who believes that God is sovereign over *everything*, the ultimate answer is unmistakable: these sins are committed—by *the elect*—in exact accordance with the decreed will of God.⁷ God determines that his regenerated children will continue to sin, and indeed that they will continue to sin in exactly this manner. While such an account of sin and sovereignty might offer initial comfort to the person committing the sin, it is far from clear how this might be consistent with God’s commands to live in purity, or with promises that in times of temptation he will provide “a way of escape” (1 Cor 10:12-13).

Objections to *S* based upon such considerations (and many others as well) are found throughout the Christian tradition, but my primary purpose here is not to explore these further. Thus I shall not further canvass, extend, or evaluate all of these. Nor shall I deal with the considerable responses to such objections. Instead, allowing such concerns to move us to the heart of the discussion, I shall focus on the theological consequences of (what I take to be) an extremely influential recent theological response to such objections and concerns.

III. THE “JUSTIFICATION” OF GOD’S WAYS

Some proponents of *S* simply continue to insist that their view of sovereignty is the correct one—but do not think that an adequate defense of this is either possible or necessary. They appeal directly to mystery at this point; they say that “God’s ways are not ours,” and these ways are beyond comprehension. Sure, it might *look* as if a truly good God would not act this way, it might *seem* to be the case that an infinitely loving God would not determine that some people would commit such horrific atrocities and be eternally damned—but who are we to say anything about what goodness really is? God just is sovereign, and *S* just is the proper account of sovereignty, and from there we simply appeal to mystery.

But other proponents of *S* are not nearly so timid; they have much more to say. They offer a “justification of God.” They say that God does all these things to glorify himself, and indeed that this is the *right* course of action for God to take.

⁷As is recognized by John Piper, “An Interview with John Piper” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 234-36.

A. The Majesty of Divine Sovereignty

John Piper, an influential pastoral theologian who writes many very helpful treatises on the Christian life and who is referred to by Collin Hansen as “the chief spokesman for the Calvinist resurgence among young evangelicals,” is convinced that Christians who believe in divine sovereignty both *can* and *should* say much more.⁸ Why do all of these horrific events occur? Why are these perverse atrocities committed? Because God determines that they will occur; God determines that they will occur exactly as they do. He offers a ringing affirmation of *S*; this can be seen in his enthusiastic endorsement of the “soft” or “compatibilist” determinism of Jonathan Edwards.⁹ With Charles Spurgeon, he is convinced that “every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes.”¹⁰ He works long and hard to illustrate this from Rom 9:1-23, which he concludes is about the purposes of God being preserved “by means of the predestination of individuals to their respective eternal destinies.”¹¹ And we are not to think that God is righteous *in spite of* such action—instead we are to see that God is righteous *because of* this action, for the “heart of Paul’s defense” is this: “in choosing unconditionally those on whom he will have mercy and those whom he will harden God is not unrighteous, for in this ‘electing purpose’ he is acting out of a full allegiance to his name and esteem of his glory.”¹²

This all-determining action of God notably includes predestination and election, but it extends far beyond—it extends to everything. God determines *all* events that occur in the universe, including all demonic and satanic action.¹³ As Mark R. Talbot puts it,

⁸Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed*, 29. Hansen refers to self-described “Piper fiends” who listen to hundreds of his sermons (some sermons more than fifty times each!).

⁹E.g., John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards, with the Complete Text of The End for Which God Created the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 86-89.

¹⁰Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “God’s Providence,” *Sermons*, Vol. 54. Spurgeon goes on to say that “every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit as well as the sun in the heavens—that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche. He that believes in a God must believe this truth. There is no standing point between this and atheism. There is no half way between a mighty God that worketh all things by the sovereign counsel of his will and no God at all. A God that cannot do as he pleases—a God whose will is frustrated, is not a God, and cannot be a God. I could not believe in a God like that.”

¹¹John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 218, cf. 56-73.

¹²*Ibid.*, 219.

¹³On this see John Piper, “Suffering and the Sovereignty of God: Ten Aspects of God’s Sovereignty Over Satan and Satan’s Hand in It,” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, 19-30. Piper here uses the rather confusing (given his determinism) language of “permission.” By my lights, what he means when he says that God “permits” something is this (a) God determines it to occur and then (b) does not act so as to override his previous ordination. Regarding talk of “permission,” I think that John

God creates, sends, instigates, and moves others to do evil, because “nothing that exists or occurs falls outside God’s ordaining will.”¹⁴ Talbot makes the point with relentless and unmistakable clarity:

Nothing, including no evil person or thing or event or deed. God’s foreordination is the ultimate reason why everything comes about, including the existence of all evil persons and things and the occurrence of any evil acts or events.¹⁵

Make no mistake: “when even the worst of evils befall us, they do not ultimately come from anywhere other than God’s hand.”¹⁶

B. *The Best of All Possible Worlds*

Why do all these horrors occur? Because God determines them. But *why* does God determine them? Piper responds with clarity: because this is the best possible world, and horrors and sinful actions are part of this world that is the “best.”¹⁷ Pastoral theologian that he is, Piper says this with deep awareness of the sweeping breadth and horrific depth of sin and suffering. As he puts it, “diseases, defects, disabilities, natural catastrophes, human atrocities—from the youngest infant to the oldest codger, from the vilest scoundrel to the sweetest saint—suffering is no respecter of persons.”¹⁸ And he wants to recognize and affirm that sin and suffering are genuinely awful. But he continues to insist that “God ordains that what he hates will come to pass.”¹⁹

Piper recognizes that sin and suffering are repulsive to God—at least at some level: “God does not delight in this suffering.”²⁰ He takes such texts as 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9; Ezek 18:23, 32; 33:11; Matt 23:37; and related passages as straightforward affirmations that God indeed *does* love everyone and desires for their salvation.²¹ He works to explain this by saying that “God’s emotional life is complex

Calvin’s approach is more consistent, but since this seems to be an intramural debate among proponents of S, I shall not dwell here. But see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.xviii.1, and John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 696.

¹⁴Mark R. Talbot, “All the Good That Is Ours in Christ: Seeing God’s Gracious Hand in the Hurts Others Do to Us,” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, 43 (41-43), emphasis original.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 43-44.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷See the explanation in “What Does Piper Mean When He Says That He’s a Seven-Point Calvinist?” at desiringgod.org (accessed 29 March 2008).

¹⁸Piper, “The Suffering of Christ and the Sovereignty of God,” 86.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 85.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 86.

²¹John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God? Divine Election and God’s Desire for All to Be Saved,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). Notably, Piper does not resort to saying either that (a) God really does not love all or (b) that God loves everyone only in the sense(s) associated with “common grace.”

beyond our ability to fully comprehend. . . . therefore we should not stumble over the fact that God does and does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked."²²

As it stands, this just sounds confused, and it produces a portrait of a conflicted God: to this point Piper's God seems to be a God who determines everything, and who does so for such reasons and in such ways that it both pleases and distresses him.²³ It is not immediately obvious just how this view might cohere with the biblical affirmation that God is "not a God of confusion, but of peace" (1 Cor 14:33).²⁴ As Karl Barth points out,

In Him there is no paradox, no antinomy, no division, no inconsistency, not even the possibility of it. He is the Father of lights with whom there is no variableness nor interplay of light and darkness. What He is and does He is and does in full unity with Himself.²⁵

But Piper explains further that God sees things through "two lenses": the "narrow lens" focuses on sin and tragedy as it is in itself (thus producing the sorrow and compassion in God), while the "wide lens" allows God to see "the tragedy or the sin in relation to everything leading up to it and everything flowing out of it. He sees it in all the connections and effects that form a pattern or mosaic stretching into eternity. This mosaic, with all its (good and evil) parts he does delight in (Ps 115:3)."²⁶ So looking through the narrow lens, God is faced with things that bring him sorrow. But looking through the wide lens, God sees that it all brings glory to him, thus he delights in it.

God has a "true compassion," a "real and deep compassion for perishing sinners."²⁷ He says that "there is a genuine inclination in God's heart to spare those who have committed treason against his kingdom."²⁸ Then why does not God save all? After all, as the Sole Determining Force in the cosmos, surely he could do so. The reason is this:

Not all of these longings govern God's actions. He is governed by the depth of his wisdom . . . (and) there are holy and just reasons

²²Ibid., 126-27.

²³How his view might possibly work with a doctrine of divine simplicity is far from clear.

²⁴First Corinthians 14:33 comes in the context of a discussion of orderliness in worship (not a discussion of the will[s] of God). Still, though, it seems clear that the prescriptions for worship given here are given because of who God is—a God of peace rather than confusion.

²⁵Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 186.

²⁶Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" 126.

²⁷Ibid., 128.

²⁸Ibid., 129.

for why the affections of God's heart have the nature and intensity and proportion that they do.²⁹

And what, we may ask, are those reasons? We are told that "God's will to save all people is restrained by his commitment to the glorification of his sovereign grace (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14; Rom. 9:22-23)."³⁰

God's reasons for determining that evil and sin would exist (and exist just as they do), and that some of the sinners would be damned to perdition, are that this divine action allows for the full range of divine attributes to be exercised. Something in God wants to save all, but this is overridden by his concern that he be truly glorified. And, as we shall see, since such glorification can occur only in the presence of sin, evil, and reprobation, then it is fitting and proper that God act in just this way. Indeed, such glorification is the very righteousness of God—it is what allows God to be *God*. This means, then, that Piper's final answer to the question of "why these occasions of sin and suffering?" is that this is the best possible world, and it is further that this is the best possible world because it is the world in which God is most glorified. The greatest good then, is this: it is God being maximally glorified in the possible world that glorifies him the most.

C. The "Justification" Explained

So all these horrific events occur, all these sinful atrocities are committed, because God determines them. And God determines them in this exact way because this is the best possible world. But *why* is this the best possible world? Again, Piper has a direct answer, and it is this answer that brings us to the heart of his account of the "justification of God."

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."³¹ 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.³²

Second, Piper is clear as to *how* this possible world is maximally glorifying to God. God's sovereign determination of all things, seen perhaps most particularly in his predestination of some to heaven and others to eternal damnation, is *not* an impenetrable mystery but *is* the powerful expression of the fact that God is passionate about

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., 130.

³¹Piper, *The Justification of God*, 218-19.

³²Ibid., 219.

the pursuit of his own glory. This can be seen with more clarity in Piper's lengthy quotation of Daniel Fuller:

To be sure, people have no right to ask God to cease to be God by surrendering any of his sovereignty. But humankind is not asked to submit blindly, for God's exercise of His sovereignty is as purposeful and nonarbitrary as the way potters use clay. . . . it is perfectly fitting for God to work with His creation so that it will externalize *all* aspects of His glory: On the one hand, His wrath and power; on the other hand, His mercy.

But He has a greater purpose than simply showing the full range of His glory, for He would not be showing Himself as He really is if He set forth His wrath and power as coordinate and equal to His love and mercy. God delights far more in His mercy than in His wrath. So in order to show the priority of His mercy, He must place it against the backdrop of wrath. How could God's mercy appear fully as His great mercy unless it was extended to people who were under His wrath and therefore could ask only for mercy? It would be impossible for them to share with God the delight He has in His mercy unless they saw clearly the awfulness of the almighty wrath from which His mercy delivers them. Thus to show the full range of His glory God prepares beforehand not only vessels of mercy but also vessels of wrath, in order that the riches of His glory in connection with the vessels of mercy might thereby become more clearly manifest. . . . Thus it is surely right for God to prepare vessels of wrath, for it is only by so doing that He is able to show the exceeding riches of His glory, the capstone of which is mercy. For God not to prepare vessels of wrath would mean that He could not fully reveal Himself as the merciful God. Thus creation could not honor Him for what He really is, and God would then have been unrighteous, for in the act of creation He would have done something inconsistent with the full delight He has in His own glory.

But He is indeed righteous, not only in preparing vessels of wrath, but also in finding fault with such vessels and visiting wrath upon them. To prepare such vessels but then to fail to visit wrath upon them would be to act with complete disregard for His own glory. God acts consistently with love for His glory only as He opposes all who disdain finding delight in His glory. If He did not act this way in the world He freely created, He would cease to be God.³³

This is seen further in Piper's quotation of Jonathan Edwards:

It is proper that the shining forth of God's glory be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth. . . . thus it is necessary that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice and holiness should be manifested. But this could not be unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because

³³Ibid., 215-16, from Daniel Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 445-48.

those parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all.³⁴

It seems, then, that God would be *imperfect* were it not for the exercise and display of these attributes.³⁵ Or, as Piper himself puts it, "The glory of God shines most brightly, most fully, most beautifully in the manifestation of the glory of his grace." And since that can only occur in a context of sin and suffering, the result is that

Suffering is an essential part of the created universe in which the greatness of the glory of the grace of God can be most fully revealed. Suffering is an essential part of the tapestry of the universe so that the weaving of grace can be seen for what it really is.³⁶

For Piper (following Fuller and Edwards), for God to be who he is, God must display the full range of his attributes.³⁷ God must display these in the right balance and percentages, and to do so he creates a world that allows him to do just that. Creating such a world—with evil and sinful people to be damned as well as some to be saved—lets God be God. In passionate pursuit of his own glory, God does just that.

Piper recognizes that we may not like it. Indeed, we usually do not. But, Piper remonstrates, that is just because we forget who God is—and that we are not him. We rebel against the very idea that God predestines for his own glory and thus renders it necessary that creatures made in his image will be damned so that he can look good, and our very rebellion is further proof that we want to be God. On the other hand, when we come to the place where we recognize just who *is* and who is *not* sovereign, we understand that it is right for God to pursue his own glory this way. Indeed, we will see that God would fail to be God if he did anything less.³⁸ For "to argue that God should not give open display to his wrath is to imply that it is not in fact glorious, that God is not in fact as he *should* be."³⁹ If God were "ever to act contrary to this eternal passion for his own perfections he would be unrighteous, he would be an idolater."⁴⁰

So why is there such sin and suffering in a world governed by the God whose sovereignty is all-determining? Because God determines it this way. Why does God do this? Because this is the state of affairs in which he is most glorified—thus it is the best

³⁴Piper, *The Justification of God*, 215-16 n. 33.

³⁵More precisely, the "shining forth" would be imperfect. But since such a "shining forth" itself is necessary for this theology, this need not detain us here.

³⁶Piper, "The Suffering of Christ and the Sovereignty of God," 82.

³⁷When I say "following Edwards," I make no judgment about Piper's interpretation of Edwards.

³⁸E.g., Piper, *The Justification of God*, 121-22.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 188, emphasis original.

⁴⁰John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland: Multnomah, 1991), 39.

possible world. And what makes this the best possible world? It is the one that allows God to be what he *ought* to be—maximally glorified—it is the one that allows God to truly be *God*.

IV. SOME PROBLEMS WITH THE “JUSTIFICATION” STRATEGY

As bold as it is, however, in its breathtaking scope, Piper’s account is hardly immune to criticism. David Bentley Hart, for example, vehemently rejects such attempts to “justify” God’s ways. Commenting on those who are “positively intoxicated with the grandeur of divine sovereignty,”⁴¹ he says that they “defame the love and goodness of God out of a servile and unhealthy fascination with his ‘dread sovereignty.’”⁴² He insists that God is “infinitely sufficient in himself,” thus God “has no need of a passage through sin and death to manifest his glory.”⁴³ He inveighs against Calvin’s “exaggerated adoration of God’s sheer omnipotence” in the Genevan Reformer’s teaching that “God predestined the fall of man so as to show forth his greatness in both the salvation and damnation of those he has eternally predestined to their several fates.”⁴⁴ This, he says, threatens to make God the author of evil, and he states that

The curious absurdity of all such doctrines is that, out of a pious anxiety to defend God’s transcendence against any scintilla of genuine creaturely freedom, they threaten effectively to collapse that transcendence into absolute identity—with the world, with us, with the devil.⁴⁵

The price of such justification, he concludes, is exorbitant:

It requires us to believe in and love a God whose good ends will be realized not only in spite of—but entirely by way of— every cruelty, every fortuitous misery, every catastrophe, every betrayal, every sin the world has ever known; it requires us to believe in the eternal spiritual necessity of a child dying an agonizing death from diphtheria, of a young mother ravaged by cancer, of tens of thousands of Asians swallowed in an instant by the sea, of millions murdered in death camps and gulags and forced famines. . . . It is a

⁴¹David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 27.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 89.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 90-91. Those tempted to dismiss such claims out of hand should revisit the criticisms made by Charles Hodge against the perceived “pantheism” of Jonathan Edwards, e.g., *Systematic Theology: Volume One* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1872), 577. The contemporary Reformed philosophical theologian John W. Cooper judges that Edwardsian theology “is best construed philosophically as a pantheism that borders on Spinozan pantheism” (*Pantheism, The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006], 77).

strange thing to seek peace in a universe rendered morally intelligible at the cost of a God rendered morally loathsome.⁴⁶

Hart's style can be rather bracing, and it may be that he has overstated his case at certain points. Still, though, I am convinced that he is fundamentally right in his basic concerns. At the risk of being a bit tedious, in what follows I spell this out in some detail. Consider what I shall call:

A. Some Moral Problems

- 6) If X is the greatest good for God, then X is the greatest good (simpliciter);
- 7) Evil is a part of the greatest good for God (from Piper's theology);⁴⁷
- 8) Therefore, evil is part of the greatest good (from 6, 7).

As we have seen, (7) is a staple of Piper's theology. The greatest good is God being maximally glorified in the world that glorifies him the most. Unfortunately, however, (8) clearly violates *G: Good is not evil*. *G* is a most fundamental and basic truth—Christians and other moral realists would say that it is a *necessary* truth—so there seems to be a pretty severe problem here.

But maybe not so fast. One might reasonably point out that the argument from (6) – (8) is vague, and one might also reasonably wonder if it might be a paradigmatic example of the composition fallacy. I readily admit that the argument is vague—perhaps even hopelessly vague. But rather than try to disambiguate it adequately, we can instead let it alert us to another problem in the neighborhood. According to Piper's account of divine love, God's love for us is ultimately a way of loving himself better. Thus God takes the righteous course of action and seeks his own glory by creating the world where the divinely-determined ratio of rapes, earthquakes, damnation, and salvation is such that it works to glorify him maximally. Piper's view thus entails the conclusion that divine love is the cosmic exception to what we know of love from 1 Cor 13:5, which clearly states that "love is not self-seeking." The defender of Piper's theology might respond by saying that 1 Corinthians 13 simply is not relevant here; he might point out that this passage refers to human love, and he might further make a case that God's love is *unlike* ours in this way. But that would simply amount to an admission of my point, and such a retreat to equivocation (about this divinely-revealed account of love) would make it hard indeed to account for such non-equivocal imperatives as that found in John 15:12: "my command is this: love each other as I have loved you."

⁴⁶Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 99.

⁴⁷Indeed, *evil as everlasting* is part of the greatest good for God. Evil does not, on this account, play a merely temporary role, for eternal damnation is necessary.

Furthermore, on Piper's account we would be left wondering just why we should see sin and suffering as finally reprehensible. After all, if all natural and moral evil is that important for God, that *good* for God in the long run (or as seen through the "wide-angle lens")—even *essential* to God—then why should we detest sin, death, and the devil? If all events of natural evil and all actions of moral evil finally come together in such a way that God is maximally glorified and therefore finally really *God* because of them, then why should we have a problem with that? If we are really concerned that God be maximally glorified, then why should we lament *anything* that in the long run brings glory to him? But then why would we lament *anything at all*? Would we not be doubting the wisdom, power, and righteousness of God? Surely any defender of S would agree that we are to "abhor what is evil and cling to what is good" (Rom 12:9). We are, as Hart puts it, to hate evil with a "perfect hatred."⁴⁸ Just how we are to do so, however, when we are privy to Piper's insights about how all of these things serve to maximally glorify God is far from clear.

Yet other problems await.

B. A Mereological Problem

Consider:

- 9) If evil aspects (events, actions, dispositions, etc.) are essential parts of the greatest good, then the greatest good is dependent upon those parts;
- 10) Evil aspects are essential parts of the greatest good (without which the greatest good could not exist) (from Piper's theology);
- 11) Therefore, the greatest good is dependent upon evil for its existence (from 9, 10).

As we have seen, (10) is part and parcel of Piper's theology. Nor is it hard to see why this is so on Piper's view. Piper repeatedly states that "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."⁴⁹ His statement that this is God's "essential nature" is somewhat puzzling: is this really what he means to say? Apparently so, for he reinforces this statement by saying that "this is the essence of what it means to be God."⁵⁰

But what does this mean? Piper does not explain his position any further, so I shall take his statement in the context of a fairly standard sense of what "essence" means. I follow Thomas V. Morris

⁴⁸Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 101.

⁴⁹E.g., Piper, *The Justification of God*, 218.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 219.

in understanding an individual essence as the “full set of properties, individually necessary and jointly sufficient” to be numerically identical with an individual.⁵¹ An essential attribute or property of God is one that is exemplified by God in every possible world. As Alvin Plantinga puts it,

Something has a property essentially if and only if it has it and could not possibly have lacked it. Another way to put the same thing is to say that an object *x* has a property *P* essentially if and only if *x* has it in every possible world in which *x* exists.⁵²

E. J. Lowe concurs:

An essential property of an object is a property which that object always possesses and which it could not have failed to possess—in other words, in the language of possible worlds, it is a property which that object possesses at all times in every possible world in which it exists.⁵³

In this light, perhaps we can better understand what Piper means by his claims.

Consider the property *D*: *displaying wrath*. On Piper’s account, *D* is an essential divine property or attribute. And if *D* is an essential divine attribute, then divine wrath must be displayed for God to be God.⁵⁴ If so, then we would be faced with two (broad) options: either God’s essential wrath is internal (maybe he is always angry with himself *sans* sin), or the creation of a sinful universe is necessary for God. I think that we can be confident that the former would be rejected by the defenders of *S*, so we are left with the second.

Not surprisingly, Piper endorses the claim of Edwards that “it is necessary that God’s awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed.”⁵⁵ Thus “evil is necessary,”⁵⁶ and “God is more glorious for having conceived and

⁵¹See the discussion by Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 38-41. Graeme Forbes puts this with more precision when he states that “an individual essence of an object *x* is a set of properties *I* which satisfies the following two conditions: every property *P* in *I* is an essential property of *x*, and it is not possible that some object *y* distinct from *x* has every member of *I*” (*The Metaphysics of Modality* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985], 99).

⁵²Alvin Plantinga, “Essence and Essentialism,” in *A Companion to Metaphysics* (ed. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa; Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 138. For more on essential properties in relation to modal concepts, see Kenneth Konyndyk, *Introductory Modal Logic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 113-14.

⁵³E. J. Lowe, *A Survey of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 96.

⁵⁴So if God exists necessarily, then divine wrath must exist (at all times) in all possible worlds. If, on the other hand, God exists contingently, then divine wrath exists (at all times) in all possible worlds in which God has existence.

⁵⁵Piper, *The Justification of God*, 215.

⁵⁶Quoted in John Piper, “Is God Less Glorious Because He Ordained that There Be Evil?” at desiringgod.org (accessed 29 March 2007).

created and governed a world like this with all its evil."⁵⁷ Following (his interpretation of) Edwards, he insists that God is perfect if and only if God is maximally glorified.⁵⁸ And since God is maximally glorified only with (or by) evil, we are left to conclude that he would be imperfect without such evil.

So (10) is vital to Piper's theological defense of *S*. And (11) follows directly from the conjunction of (9) (which, ongoing discussions about parthood and complexity notwithstanding, seems indisputable) and (10). But (11) pretty clearly violates robust accounts of both divine holiness and divine aseity.⁵⁹ As N. T. Wright concludes, Piper's theology "cannot escape sounding as though God *needs* sin, in order to display his glorious and to-be-worshiped wrath."⁶⁰ Compromising divine aseity for the sake of a particular formulation of the doctrine of divine sovereignty seems hopeless—it is much like cutting off one's arm to save one's hand. And compromising divine holiness for the sake of such a formulation is more akin to cutting out one's heart to save one's hand! Surely it is better to give up such a *particular formulation* of the doctrine of divine sovereignty (either *S* or at least Piper's way of defending it) than to sacrifice both divine holiness and divine sovereignty!

If possible, things get worse. For reflection on these matters raises worries as well about what I shall call

C. A Modal Problem

Consider further:

- 12) The best possible world = df the possible world in which God is maximally glorified (from Piper's theology);
- 13) If God is not maximally glorified, then God is not God (from Piper's theology);

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Piper, *The Justification of God*, 216.

⁵⁹The problem is even more pronounced if, on Piper's account, only one possible world is feasible for God. In response to the question "is God causally determined to create as he does by causes over which he has no control?" Thomas P. Flint responds by saying "of course not. There *are* no causes external to God which could, so to speak, set him in motion, for God is the free creator of all causal agents. Nor is it plausible to think that internal factors (relating to his nature or character, say) over which he has no control fully determine his creative activity. For if they did, then this world would be the only genuinely possible world, and all true distinctions between necessity and contingency would collapse, as would the gratuitousness both of God's creation and our existence" (*Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998], 30). Beyond the points made by Flint, there seems to be an additional question for Piper: if God's actions are determined (even if by his own nature), in what meaningful sense can he be said to *choose* who is saved and who is damned?

⁶⁰N. T. Wright, "Review of *The Justification of God*," *EvQ* (1986): 83, emphasis original.

- 14) w^* is the best possible world;
- 15) Therefore, if God does not actualize w^* , then God is not maximally glorified (from 12, 14);
- 16) Therefore, if God does not actualize w^* , then God is not God (from 13, 14, 15);
- 17) Therefore, God's "godness" is contingent upon the actuality of w^* (from 13, 14, 15, 16);
- 18) w^* is the actual world;
- 19) Therefore, without the actual world God would not be God (from 16, 17, 18).

As we have seen, Piper's theology demands (12) and (13). And as we can see, the conclusion (19) follows. I have added no premises at all (controversial or otherwise) to Piper's theology—I have only drawn out the implications of it. And these conclusions should not be acceptable to anyone who takes seriously the historic doctrine of divine sovereignty. For (19) entails the unfortunate conclusion that God's existence (or status as God) is contingent! Even worse, it yields the absurd entailment that God is dependent upon you and me—and our sins! If this strikes us as pretentious and outrageous—this is because it should! Indeed, as Karl Barth has said (in reference to another issue), "what is meant to be supreme praise of God can in fact become supreme blasphemy."⁶¹

Of course Piper neither says nor, I'm sure, intends any of these entailments. Indeed, I trust that he would be aghast at them. But as Hart points out, "one must ask of . . . every theologian . . . whether, when the logic of their theology is pressed on toward its ultimate implications, it can arrive at any other end."⁶² Nor would it help at all to, on the one hand, *deny* (no matter how repeatedly, loudly, or forcefully) that the world and its sin are necessary for God while, on the other hand, continuing to insist on the premises that entail that God indeed is dependent upon the world.⁶³ To do so would merely be to trade an obviously problematic account of divine sovereignty for an incoherent one. As Hart notes,

It is a logical absurdity simultaneously to assert that God is the source of all *and* that God can "become" something more or other than he previously was. And if God's love were in any sense shaped by sin, suffering, and death, then sin, suffering, and death would always in some sense be features of who he is. . . . (this) means that evil would somehow be a part of God, and that goodness would require evil to be good. Such a God could not *be* love, even if he in some sense should prove to be "loving." Nor

⁶¹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 185.

⁶²David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 166.

⁶³Piper appears to issue such denials in *The Pleasures of God*, e.g., 18, 48.

would he be the good as such, nor being as such. He, like us, would be a synthesis of life and death.⁶⁴

V. THE BIBLICAL VIEW?

But is it “the biblical view?” Piper’s account of the “justification of God” is couched in exegesis, and it stakes a strong claim to being authorized by Scripture. But is it? We should certainly hope not, for if it is then we are faced with the conclusion that the traditional doctrine of divine sovereignty (which includes aseity) is fundamentally mistaken. Gladly, though, there is reason to think that Piper’s view is not demanded by Scripture. Although Piper’s exegetical case deserves far more interaction than I can here afford to offer, even a few observations should suffice to show that it is not “the biblical view.”

A. *The Strongest Case? The Argument from Rom 9:1-23*

I focus these observations on Piper’s treatment of Rom 9:1-23. This is, so far as I know, his most detailed and extensive work on this issue, and in it he offers some impressive exegesis. Before proceeding, however, let me serve notice that I will assume (for the sake of discussion) Piper’s view that this passage refers directly to (a) the eternal destinies of (b) individuals.

In looking at his arguments, it seems to me that there are two crucial areas where he needs to make a compelling case but fails to do so. The first of these concerns the critical issue of the relation of the clauses in vv. 22-23. For Piper’s argument to work, the *θέλω* clause must be causal (according to which God endured vessels of wrath *because* he wanted to show his wrath) rather than concessive (according to which God endured vessels of wrath with much long-suffering *although* he willed to show forth his wrath). Piper mounts a fairly strong case that this clause is causal, and he may be correct.⁶⁵ But he has not ruled out the concessive reading of this clause. For on the causal reading, Paul would be saying that God endured these vessels of wrath—and thus did not show his wrath—*because* he wanted to show his wrath. But this is hard to even make sense of; as Ben Witherington III notes, such a statement is “difficult to imagine.”⁶⁶ So far as I can see, Piper offers no explanation here. On

⁶⁴Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 78.

⁶⁵Other fine evangelical exegetes agree with Piper’s general interpretation here (of a causal reading); see especially Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 519-21, and Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 604-8. Moo says that “a decision between these options is difficult” on exegetical grounds (p. 605). Schreiner would appear to agree as well with Piper’s full theological explanation (e.g., p. 523); whether or not Moo would agree is another matter.

⁶⁶Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 257.

the other hand, as Witherington points out, the concessive reading would yield the conclusion that “though God would show forth his wrath against the vessels of wrath, nonetheless he had patience with them for an extended period of time.”⁶⁷

The second area that remains in dispute concerns the interpretation of *κατήρτισμενα*. Piper notes that although there are several views of how this might be understood, he concludes that “God is the one who fits (or creates) the vessels for destruction” (eliminating the possibilities either that the vessels of wrath made themselves fit for destruction or that Paul simply intends to express a mystery).⁶⁸ He rejects (as “least likely”—not as impossible) the option that the voice is middle rather than passive.⁶⁹ Of course grammatically the middle is possible, so an appeal to grammar would not assist him here. His appeal is to context, and he concludes that “in a context where the sovereignty of God as a potter over clay has been stressed, Paul would have had to use a clearer grammatical construction to signify all of a sudden that man’s destiny is self-determined.”⁷⁰ Piper follows this by pointing out that the “well-known reflexive use of *ἑτοίμαζεν ἑαυτον* (Rev 8:6; 19:7) lay ready for such use if Paul had intended such.”⁷¹

But “clearer” to whom? Piper is right to appeal to the context, but many exegetes and theologians in the Christian tradition have understood the context (both immediate and canonical) very differently than has Piper, and they have come to very different theological conclusions. John Chrysostom, for instance, was surely well acquainted with both the grammar and the context, but he takes this as a middle rather than a passive.⁷² Nor is it obviously relevant that such a clearer construction shows up in apocalyptic material.

On the other hand, Piper’s explanation is faced with the fact that a shift occurs from the use of a “passive verb with reference to vessels of wrath (to) an active verb (*προητοίμασεν*) in reference to vessels of mercy.”⁷³ He admits that we can only “guess” as to the reason for this “awkward” move; Piper’s first guess is that maybe a shift occurred in Paul’s thought as he was writing.⁷⁴ Or, Piper

⁶⁷Witherington III, *Romans*, 257. Witherington sees vv. 22-23 as referring not to “those saved or damned from the foundation of the world, but rather vessels that are currently positively related to God and vessels that currently are not” (p. 253).

⁶⁸Piper, *The Justification of God*, 211. See also Moo, *Romans*, 607. Schreiner agrees with Piper at this point, but (so far as I can see), he rejects the middle in favor of the passive because “the middle voice is quite rare in the NT, while the passive is common” (*Romans*, 521).

⁶⁹Piper, *The Justification of God*, 211.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²John Chrysostom, *In Epistolam ad Romanos homil. XVI.v*. We can see in this context clear indication that (a) predestination follows upon foreknowledge, and (b) God’s love is without end. On Chrysostom’s exegesis, see Witherington III, *Romans*, 258.

⁷³Piper, *The Justification of God*, 213.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

suggests, we might assume that Paul is making a “statement about the way that God works,” or maybe Paul is trying to tell us that God loves some things in themselves and other things only as means to a greater end.⁷⁵ Either way, Piper’s exegetical case involves some guesswork and speculation at this point. He may in the end be correct, but surely he has not either offered a full explanation of what is going on here or ruled out the possibility that this is a middle rather than a passive. 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.

B. From Exegesis to Theology

Before moving on, however, I note one further issue. Even if Piper is right, even if his exegesis is substantially correct, it is still less than clear that he moves us all the way to his strategy of defending *S*.⁷⁶ Even if we grant his exegesis, he does not show that Paul holds to anything like Piper’s conclusion that “to argue that God should not give open display to his wrath is to imply that it is not in fact glorious, that God is not in fact as he *should* be.”⁷⁷ Piper insists that “it is the right, perhaps even the duty, of a great and gifted craftsman and artist to display the full range of his powers in the various sorts of vessels he makes and the purposes for which he designs them.”⁷⁸ He goes on to say that “it behooves every great artist to demonstrate in the variety of his work the full range of his skill and power.”⁷⁹ Piper seems to be saying something like

O: God is obligated to display his glory.

But where does *O* come from? It is not, so far as I can see, in this biblical text. Nor is it demanded by any passage of Scripture.⁸⁰ It seems to be an assumption that Piper brings to the biblical text, one that helps him explain a very difficult Pauline passage. But is this assumption itself warranted? I cannot see that it is, nor is it clear how it *might* be. *O* raises a host of interesting and potentially troubling questions: to whom is God so obligated? Surely not to another entity. Is the obligation to some abstract principle? Given Piper’s theology, this seems dubious. So is it to God himself? We don’t know. At any rate, Piper does not argue for *O*, instead it seems to function as a premise of his exegetical argument. But unless it is secure, then his argument falters.

⁷⁵Ibid., 213-14.

⁷⁶Other proponents of *S* might see this as a good thing.

⁷⁷Piper, *The Justification of God*, 188, emphasis original.

⁷⁸Ibid., 186.

⁷⁹Ibid., 187. The analogy itself is not clear—why should we think that a craftsman is skilled because some of his artifacts are of lesser quality?

⁸⁰Or, more modestly, at least Piper has not demonstrated that it is required by Scripture.

I am well aware that I have not completely overturned or refuted Piper's exegetical arguments in what I have said here. What I hope to have shown, however, is that he has not come anywhere close to closing the door on this issue. To the contrary, there are good reasons to question and be concerned by his exegetical arguments. In addition to the exegetical reasons mentioned and the broader theological arguments that I've made to this point, it is hard to deny that Piper's view goes against much of the breadth and depth of the Christian tradition; it seems beyond question that his theology is exactly the sort of view condemned by the Synod of Orange (529): "but not only do we not believe that some have been predestinated to evil by the divine power, but also, if there be any who will believe so evil a thing, we say to them, with all detestation, anathema."⁸¹ And, when such concerns are combined with broader biblical and theological objections to his view, we have ample reason to hold his defense of *S* at arm's length. Surely his particular strategy of defending *S*—however popular it might be among young evangelicals who are recent converts to "Calvinism"—is not demanded by Scripture.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this essay I have noted some long-standing reservations about formulations of the doctrine of divine sovereignty that promote and defend the view that God determines all that occurs in the cosmos, and I have raised several objections to one particular strategy of "justifying" God on this account. I have argued that such a strategy, while widely and passionately held by some evangelicals, actually entails the denial of divine aseity—a core element of the doctrine itself.

With everything in me, I believe in the sovereignty of God. I am convinced that this is a centrally important theological affirmation. It is one that is undeniably grounded in the pages of Scripture, attested to in the Christian tradition, and a great source of pastoral and personal comfort. Christians should affirm that the Triune God of holy love is omnipotent, *a se*, and actively judging and governing the world while not at all threatened by it. They should hold fast to this doctrine, and they should be comforted by the knowledge that the omnipotent power and the holy love of the Triune God are ultimately allies—even, accepting a doctrine of divine simplicity, that they are in some sense *one* in God—and that infinite strength and infinite goodness are both *for us*.

⁸¹Perhaps the most readily available translation is that of Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 62. Of course Piper is free to reject this out of hand, but, given his commitment to "historic, orthodox Christianity" (see John Piper, "Is the Glory of God at Stake?" at desiringgod.org [accessed 7 December 2005]), it is not easy to see how he could do so with consistency.

Belief in divine sovereignty is important for Christian faith. Because of divine aseity, God in no sense needs the world and its evil to be God. To quote Hart once more, "as Trinity, God always already possesses the fullness of charity in himself—difference and regard, feasting and fellowship, perfect delight and perfect rest—and has no need of any external pathos to awaken or fecundate his love. We are not necessary to him: he is not nourished by our sacrifices or ennobled by our virtues, any more than he is diminished by our sins and sufferings. This is a truth that may not aggrandize us, but it does, more wonderfully, glorify us: for it means that, though he had no need of us, still he loved us when we were not."⁸² Again, because God is sovereignly *a se*, we can maintain that he has no need of us: this world is not necessary to him, he has no need of either death camps or orphanages, ruthless murderers or devastated children. As sovereign, the Triune God is utterly free from all evil and free to be *for us*. The Triune God *is* good, true, and beautiful—or, as proponents of divine simplicity put it, God is goodness, and truth, and beauty—and thus what comes from him is good, true, and beautiful. Belief in divine sovereignty, therefore, is not at odds with nor even in "tension" with belief in the limitless goodness of God. What comes from God is good and true and beautiful, and it is to be received with gratitude and cherished as such, while what has been twisted and perverted into evil is to be rejected and hated as the parasite and destroyer and enemy that it is.

Belief in divine sovereignty is also vital for Christian hope. This is *Christian* hope; it is not passive acceptance of everything as "the way it was meant to be" or a bland cosmic optimism, rather it is the fundamentally Christian hope that in Christ God has defeated our foe, has made a mockery of what has enslaved us, and has conquered sin, death, and the devil. It is a *Christian* hope, thus it recognizes sin, death, and the devil as enemies. And it is a *Christian hope*, for it celebrates the decisive victory won for us and our salvation while also longing for the returning of our Lord when "all tears will be wiped away" and "all things will be made new" (Revelation 21). It is a *Christian hope*, a hope centered upon God's gospel, a hope centered upon the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and *reign* of the incarnate Son of God—God-for-us, God-with-us.

And belief in the sovereignty of God is also important for Christian love. Because God is triune, the loving communion shared by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is of the essence of God. God has no need of the world, either to be wrathful (as Piper's account entails) or loving. Holy love is of the essence of God, and divine aseity is the aseity of the Triune communion. As John Webster puts it, "God is a

⁸²Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 77.

se in the eternal fullness of the loving relations of the Father, Son, and Spirit."⁸³ In the words of John D. Zizioulas,

The expression "God is love" (1 John 4:16) signifies that God "subsists" as Trinity. . . . Love is not an emanation or "property" of the substance of God . . . but is constitutive of his essence, i.e., it is that which makes God what He is, the one God. Thus love ceases to be a qualifying—i.e., secondary—property of being and becomes the *supreme ontological predicate*.⁸⁴

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. We love him because he first loved us (1 John 4:19). And the Triune God first loved us because he *is* love (1 John 4:8, 16).

It is *because* of these convictions—not in spite of them—that I raise these criticisms and worries. It is because of these convictions that I suggest that we should be deeply suspicious of any model of divine sovereignty that embraces determinism. And it is on the basis of these convictions that I conclude that we should reject outright any strategies for defending such models that entail the direct denial of the doctrine itself.⁸⁵

⁸³John Webster, "God's Aseity," in *Realism and Religion: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives* (ed. Andrew Moore and Michael Scott; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 158.

⁸⁴John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 46, emphasis original. For the same sentiment from a confessional Reformed (rather than Orthodox) perspective, see Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), esp. 165-66.

⁸⁵Thanks to Phil Brown, Jim Beilby, Dave Baggett, and Jerry Walls for critical and encouraging comments on an earlier draft of this paper.