

A THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF APOSTASY IN RELATION TO THE DIVINE-HUMAN RELATIONSHIP

The Bible reveals the unfolding story of how God has interacted with humans in order to invite them into a love relationship with himself. Within its pages the Bible conveys the framework from which we understand these relationships and by which we determine how to view the offer of salvation, how it is received, and whether or not it can be forfeited.

HUMANS CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD (IMAGO DEI): In Genesis, at the outset of creation, God declares, “Let us make man in our image” as the pinnacle to the created order. Through the Imago Dei, he affords the opportunity and ability for humans to relate to himself. As we understand this relationship, several questions come to bear on the various kinds of relationships that exist between humans and the Creator. Some of these questions highlight whether God has ordained favor or disfavor toward these relationships, how the human will operate in relation to God’s will, whether the human can thwart God’s intended plan, and how to explain when individuals, in reality or seemingly, change their relationships with him.

Theologians throughout the ages have wrestled with prescribed ways to understand this divine-human relationship. During the advent of the Enlightenment, two opposing views emerged in the systematic theology of Calvinism and from the Wesleyan-Arminian view. The debate between these two threads of theology continues to reveal two divergent ways to comprehend the divine-human relationship. Calvinism, in its stricter forms, holds that God has determined the choices and outcomes for all humans—some are rescued from destruction, while others remain as objects of wrath. In this view, humans are powerless to thwart the sovereign will of their Creator, or ultimately alter whatever God has pre-ordained. On the contrary, the Wesleyan-Arminian view reveals the interactive pursuit of a Creator who longs for relationship with every human being, and in so many ways desires to offer opportunities for them to choose to know him, love him, and obey him.

When we evaluate such views, one must reconcile them with the Story of Scripture, as well as with the reality that exists in the world that God has revealed. God theoretically could have created a universe that existed with a host of different variations and possibilities that would have fit with his divine nature and character. However, we are ultimately faced with the universe that God has chosen to create, and with the kinds of relationships that God has desired to exist for those created in the Imago Dei. For this reason and by the conclusions that follow, we believe that the Wesleyan-Arminian view best describes our reality from a biblical standpoint.

GOD MADE HUMANS FOR A LOVE RELATIONSHIP: When God said, “Let us make man in our image,” he was stating more about the human condition than mere appearances. God was establishing characteristics within humans that were unique from the rest of creation and formed in his own image. In this way, humans share qualities that belong uniquely to God, and which enable affection, expression, creativity, and authority to be exemplified. Ultimately, humans were created for love relationships with their Creator. In this way, humans could receive love as a divine gift and extend love in return. Humans could, likewise, communicate with other humans, and uniquely through the divine image, communicate with God himself. As the final part of the Imago Dei, humans can create and govern—attributes that are uniquely endowed by and shared with the Creator and Governor of life itself.

The God-given qualities of the Imago Dei reveal the shared divine-human identity, and ultimately how God chooses to limit himself in regard to many of his extraordinary qualities in order to properly allow for human freedom. As a result, in order for God to allow humans to properly love, communicate, create, and govern, he chooses not to program or coerce human freedom. Quite simply, in order for humans to love, God must grant them the freedom to choose between loving him or rejecting him. If the choice to freely love God exists, then there must be the corresponding choice

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to not love him as well. God could have chosen to create things differently, but he chose love as his primary mode of expression. Therefore, when God created humans in his image in order for us to respond to his love, he also opened the door to human freedom, and at the same time closed the door on some other possible explanations.

For one to believe that God has predetermined our choices would then extinguish the very conditions for love to exist. We would not disagree that God was capable of knowing, and even possibly being able to arrange this all ahead of time. However, this does not seem to indicate the kind of world in which we live, nor does it reveal the kinds of relationships that we see described in the Scriptures. We see people make choices, and change their minds all the time. We also see people ultimately choose to turn to God, and awaken to the reality of his love through the image of God being renewed within them.

This also seems to be God's revelation concerning his interaction with humans throughout Scripture. In the book of Hosea, we find a human picture of God's relationship with his people. Through it God reveals his own disappointment, jealousy, and efforts to deal with a disobedient wife in Israel. God has a primary interest in loving his people, but their freewill does not coincide with his will for their lives. And as a result, God mourns their course of disobedience rather than ruling their relationship toward conformity to his will. God's love and human freedom take priority, while God interacts with his people to draw them back on course.

GOD'S SOVERIEGNTY: There are several cases where God had a plan, and needed to help his followers make adaptations in order to join him. Yet in each case, God was working with human freewill rather than subverting it. And to say that the details of each plan was predestined would superimpose a very mechanical and non-relational feature to the story.

Example 1: JONAH

When God wanted to reach the Ninevites, he came to Jonah, and asked him to go to Nineveh. Jonah refused to go and made it clear that he would not have any part of God's plan. It would first seem ludicrous that God's preordained plan would be that he would speak to Jonah and then cause Jonah to reject his request. As the story unfolds, we watch a God interactively working in the events of the story to bring Jonah to accomplish his will. In this way, God honors Jonah's core reality for freedom to obey, while at the same time demonstrating that he is resourceful to complete his task and bring Jonah into conformity with his desired plan again.

Example 2: THE PROMISED LAND

In the Exodus, God had brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt with a demonstration of power. He had fed them in the desert. Even when the Israelites explored the land, it was exactly as God had said, "A land flowing with milk and honey." Yet the Israelites would not enter, even though it was obviously God's will for them to enter Canaan. Mysteriously, did God not see this coming? Did his preordained timetable lose course? No, God chose not to coerce the wills of a million Hebrew people, but rather to wait forty years for a new generation that would be ready, and they were.

God's sovereignty is not defined so much by absolute control over every detail in the course of history, the present, and the future, but rather God's creative resourcefulness to accomplish his will while interactively dealing with billions of human wills. God's sovereignty is not diminished without a detailed preordained plan but rather takes on a larger involved dynamic demonstration of sovereignty. As a result, God does accomplish his desired outcomes, while choosing to limit himself for the sake of this one area of human freewill, which keeps the integrity of human love toward him

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intact. Since God's intention is a relationship of love, he does not coerce the human freewill but rather operates in such a way to respect the Imago Dei in each human.

This revelation of God's love for humanity found its greatest expression in Jesus. As he walked among the people of Palestine, he encountered favorable and hostile reactions to his message and ministry. Yet he never coerced an individual to produce faith, but rather expressed his love in genuine demonstrations, and none greater than his sacrificial death on the cross.

In this theological understanding, human freewill places the responsibility of salvation's choice upon each individual person rather than God's preordained selection. Through prevenient grace, God's Spirit works throughout the world, and in relation to God's people to evangelize the world. Since God does not preordain the destinies of each human, his Spirit works with every human heart to help them blossom into relationships toward God. Therefore, it is necessary for each person to decide to pursue this divine-human relationship in accordance with his or her own life.

ASSURANCE, BACKSLIDING, AND APOSTASY: The wonderful relationship that believers encounter when they embrace God's love provides assurance through the obstacles of life. Because God is for us, he provides help in ways that enliven our faith in him. We can pray as one created in the image of God to find comfort and ask God himself to intervene in our human affairs on behalf of us, or for those whom we love. In essence our desire, in agreement with God's will, can change the course of human events.

In Romans 8, God provides the greatest provision of hope through the inward impression of his Spirit upon our own hearts—"The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (vss. 16-17).

In this way the people of God can have confidence that they are rescued for eternal life with God and that they stand in proper relation to God concerning their hope despite any wavering that may cause them to doubt or stray from the faith. In other words, through Christ, God's people can have full assurance that their faith is genuine and approved by God.

Because of human freewill, we can also refuse to follow God's desired will for us. When the believer continually resists obedience with God's will, he can develop a backslidden state, where he does not receive the benefits that God offers, not because God withholds them, but rather because these individuals place themselves willingly outside of God's intervention. In this state, the person can still long for God's assistance and may even expect God to intervene from a distance. These people have not forfeited their salvation; they are just not experiencing the glorious benefits from abiding in Christ. They do not understand how significantly their own freewill has limited God's blessings upon their lives.

However, in certain cases, a people can forfeit their salvation when they no longer desire to be in relationship with God anymore. The apostate person forfeits his salvation not because of any action on God's behalf, but rather when the individual spurns God's love, and consciously rejects life under God's loving rule. This state is different than the backslidden state in that the individual no longer desires to call out for God's help, but rather totally decides to abandon God's grace and depart from the faith. He in essence rejects the Imago Dei and curtails God's ability to speak into his circumstances.

Several passages in Scripture describe such departures, and many more provide warnings to the faithful to remain attached to God's love and life-giving Spirit. As Paul described to Timothy in his

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first letter, such were Hymenaeus and Alexander, who suffered shipwreck in regard to the faith. In his second letter, Paul encourages Timothy to hold on to the faith so as not to depart as Hymenaeus and Philetus did. Peter also warns his readers to be on guard so that they are not carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from their secure position.

Therefore, we believe it is possible in this life to reject God's offer of salvation after having already accepted his gracious help previously. Since we believe that God does not preordain or coerce the human will, we also believe that he does not impose his sovereign will, although he continues to offer his gracious help in all situations.

CONCLUSION: God is always doing more than we often realize in relation to the human will, especially in regard to the believer. For this reason, we can cling to the assurance of salvation that he offers to us as believers. Yet the Scriptural examples and warnings are enough to alert us to the possibility of apostasy. The reality is that we encounter individuals who appear to have departed from faith and exhibit the characteristics described by the apostate life. In such cases, we are careful not to apply the term too liberally, as to suppose that we can discern another's heart before God. Yet we are ever convinced that the biblical evidence for apostasy does describe many believers who had once walked among the faithful and are no longer open to God's intervention within their hearts.