

# **Calvin, Darwin and Metaphysics**

Submitted to Christopher Strevell,  
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“The Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til”,

by

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**T**hroughout the course of human thought, there occasionally arise men, used as tools in the hands of God, whose ideas and insights affect good in the world for centuries after their death. Such a man was John Calvin. Yet in the same course of events, there will also arise men, used as tools in the hands of Satan<sup>1</sup>, who affect inestimable *evil* for centuries after their death. Such a man was Charles Darwin. Today, hundreds of years later, in the year 2009, we continue to feel repercussions from the works of both John Calvin and Charles Darwin. In America, no less than anywhere else in the world, we feel the blessing of the biblical founding of our nation resulting from the reformation teachings of men like John Calvin – 500 years ago. Yet unfortunately, we also feel, perhaps more keenly, the erosion of our Christian beginning and once-Christian culture, caused by the denial of Creator God spread through the writings of men like Charles Darwin. Our experience of these repercussions should powerfully teach us the lesson that ideas have consequences. But more than that, it should convince us of the gravity attached to the ideas we ourselves propagate – knowingly or unknowingly. And even more than that, it should motivate us to purge ourselves from any remains of anti-Christian thought, revealed, not only in the words we say, but more tellingly, in the way we live our lives.

Though Calvin and Darwin oppose each other in many areas, perhaps there is no more important a disagreement between them than their disagreement in the area of metaphysics. While Calvin set forth a metaphysic of divine determinism, Darwin set forth a metaphysic of pure Chance. Calvin attributed complete control over the world to God. In essence, Darwin attributed none. The contrast could not be more stark. Yet as the opposing viewpoints of these two men begin to trickle down into real-world application, we start to see more shades of grey. Satan would not have it any other way! The last thing he desires is for the alternatives to be clear-cut and obvious.

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<sup>1</sup> Who is ultimately a tool in the hand of God!

Thus, we are told that, in reality, the opposition between Calvin and Darwin is not so great. In fact, because they dealt with completely separate areas of thought, there is really no opposition between them at all. Calvin dealt with matters of faith and Darwin dealt with matters of Science – and ne'er the twain shall meet!

As disciples of Christ, we know that such a compartmentalization is nothing more nor less than a flat denial of the authority of Christ in all areas of life. The goal in such thinking is not unification, but *subjugation*. Thus, it behooves us to take the time, once again, to draw the line in the sand. We must not let the antithesis be blurred between Calvin and Darwin. There is a battle and it cannot cease till the foe is vanquished. God wants no peace treaties. 2009 is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Calvin's birth, and the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth. Consequently, there was never a better time to peel back the layers of grey and review afresh the opposing outlooks of these two men. In particular, we shall compare their views of reality: Calvin's metaphysic of divine determinism and Darwin's metaphysic of chance. This will prove extremely fruitful, for these exhaust the options. There never has been another alternative.

### **Darwinism as a Metaphysical Outlook**

At the very outset we face an important difficulty – important, at least, in the eyes of the secular thinkers of our age. We face this question: Can the views of these two men really be set over against each other? Aren't we simply committing the oft repeated error of comparing apples with oranges? Darwin's views, we are told, simply do not extend into the shaky world of metaphysics. He dealt exclusively with the observational, and therefore, factual world of science. Of course, no one would argue the fact that Calvin's writings are filled with metaphysical claims – claims

about the nature of reality itself, which, in the nature of the case, go beyond the sense data of everyday experience. Since Calvin was a theologian, one would expect nothing else! Darwin, on the other hand, was a naturalist who visited the Galapagos Islands, collected data on the evolution of finches and constructed a theory based on that data. So we are all agreed, the contrast could not be more stark! However, it lies not between their metaphysical positions, but rather in the fact that, while Calvin dealt with metaphysics, Darwin did not!

To this we can reply both negatively and positively. Negatively, it must be understood that such a separation between metaphysics and science is, one, philosophically dubious, two, logically impossible, and finally, historically unprecedented. Positively, it must be understood that Darwin, of consequent necessity, set forth a very definite metaphysical viewpoint. It is this viewpoint that we will contrast with the metaphysical outlook of Calvin. Let us examine the above points in greater detail.

### **The Philosophical Dubiousness of Anti-Metaphysicalism**

While we have neither the space nor the expertise to set forth a comprehensive philosophy of science, we will briefly note that science cannot be divorced from philosophy. Certain metaphysical assumptions must be made in order for the project of science to get off the ground. Science, for example, presupposes the reality of an external world. But is this a question on which science itself can pronounce a verdict? Clearly not! It is a question of metaphysics to which the processes of scientific inquiry logically cannot extend because its answer is fundamental to the very *practice* of science. Thus, anyone who involves themselves in science,

in the nature of the case, also involves themselves in questions of metaphysics. If we are scientists, knowingly or unknowingly, we are also metaphysicists!

Consider Darwin's theory of evolution. One of the keys to the viability of his theory is an assumption about the uniformity of nature. We can ask this question: Does the "fact" that certain evidence in the recent past (e.g. the evolution of finches on the Galapagos Islands) allegedly implies the reality of evolutionary processes give us any right to assume that similar evidence from past ages also implies similar evolutionary processes? Unless we hold to the uniformity of nature, absolutely not! If nature, at some point, did not operate in its current manner, we have no right to interpret similar evidence (from past ages) as if it did. Now the point here is not to deny that Darwin held to the uniformity of nature, but simply to point out that Darwin's theories, by implication, did extend into the world of metaphysics!

### **The Logical Impossibility of Anti-Metaphysicalism**

Scripture teaches us that God created the world and its several species. This is a scientific and a metaphysical claim. It is a claim about the natural order but it is also a claim about reality. It was this doctrine which Darwin forcefully denied. But it must be noted that in that denial, he was himself making a metaphysical claim! Now, even if Darwin would not have said that the creation doctrine is *false* because of its metaphysical nature, he would have at least maintained that it cannot be known to be true – which is, for all practical purposes, the very same thing!

Regardless, this is still a claim about the nature of reality. It is to make the metaphysical statement that science or sense observation is the only possible source of truth. In summary, to deny the doctrine of creation is to extend oneself into the realm of metaphysics.

## **No Historical Precedent for Science without Metaphysics**

Given the preceding consideration, it is clear that a hard and fast division between metaphysics and science cannot be secured: it has never been secured, and never will be secured! This point is well illustrated in the Enlightenment thinkers who desperately sought freedom from the bondage of “religious superstition.” If any age was revolutionary in throwing off the bands of revelation, it was the Age of the Enlightenment. If any age was confident in man’s ability to discover truth apart from the authority of a metaphysical system, it was the Age of the Enlightenment. Yet even here we find deep-seeded and ever-present metaphysical assumptions that the universe is rational and that the mind of man can come into contact with that universe to produce objective truth.

The belief that the hammer and chisel of man’s intellect can carve a unified body of truth out of the diverse facts of the universe was not a byproduct of the enlightenment program – it was its founding metaphysical presupposition!

Perhaps even more thoroughgoing in their anti-metaphysicalism were the thinkers of the Vienna Circle. These Logical Positivists also saw the “stranglehold” of revelation as the downfall of any true science. Thus, they generated the “verification principle” as a sure means by which to purify scientific thought. The test was simple – and very effective. It stated briefly that any statement which is not verifiable through observation and experimentation should be discarded as meaningless. Unfortunately though, the test was entirely too effective. For, the verification principle did not even meet its own criteria for meaningfulness. The test, as a philosophical presupposition about the nature of truth, could not, in the nature of the case, be verified by observation and experimentation. Thus, in both these cases, we see that even those who are most

arduous in their anti-metaphysical attempts must first abandon their program to begin their program.

Having shown the flaws of anti-metaphysicalism and the impossibility of a complete separation between science and metaphysics, we can conclude, one, that Darwin, of necessity, did possess a metaphysical outlook, and two, that his views therefore can be contrasted with those of Calvin.

### **Darwin's Metaphysic**

But what was Darwin's metaphysic? It certainly was nothing new. Darwin was a direct descendent of the Enlightenment thinkers before him. He pursued a scientific program which ignored the claims of revelation and supernatural authority. In the opening sentences of his introduction to, *The Origin of the Species*, he comments that, "WHEN on board H.M.S. 'Beagle,' as naturalist, I was much struck with certain facts in the distribution of the organic beings inhabiting South America, and in the geological relations of the present to the past inhabitants of that continent. These facts, as will be seen in the latter chapters of this volume, seemed to throw some light on the origin of species—that mystery of mysteries, as it has been called by one of our greatest philosophers." His beginning presupposition, then, is that revelation – including the Word of God – cannot be trusted or taken as authoritative in the area of origins. If ever believed to be true, it would first need to meet the rigorous demands of scientific observation. In any event, such a verification is a long way off, for, as Darwin comments, the origin of species is as of yet a "mystery of mysteries."

Darwin patently dismissed revelational authority. But, in order for us to get at the heart of his *own* metaphysical outlook, it's important for us to ask this insightful question: on what basis did he do so? One claim to authority can only be set aside on the basis of a higher authority. So, what was Darwin's authority? We need not look far for the answer: for *Darwin* was his own authority. In adherence to a famous manifesto<sup>2</sup>, Darwin pursued a course that was "...autonomous ... needing no theological or ideological sanction." He was the starting-point and foundation of his own metaphysics! Therefore, in consistent fashion, Darwin denied that God's creative and providential hand is the underlying force behind reality. This would have destroyed his autonomy!

What then, we ask Darwin, *is* the basic nature of reality? If God is not back of everything, who or what is? Surely Darwin would not claim that position for himself, and yet we look far and wide for an alternative! To offer determinism as an answer to the question, as many have done, is simply to *beg* the question. Suppose we accept that nature operates on a deterministic basis; we must still ask *why* it does so. For, unless we know *why* it operates on such a basis, how can we be sure that it *does* operate on such a basis? Once we cut away this mask of determinism, we finally begin to see the true state of things in non-Christian metaphysics. Unbelievers, who reject God as the Great Determiner, are left with but one option: only surrender to an all-encompassing Chance will "free" them from God's all-determinative authority. Cornelius Van Til, who perhaps better than anyone else has traced this thread of chance throughout all anti-Christian metaphysics, summarizes unbelieving thought on this point. He says, speaking from the perspective of unbelievers, "The facts of man's environment are not created or controlled by the providence of God. They are brute facts, uninterpreted and ultimately irrational. The universe is

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<sup>2</sup> The Humanist Manifesto II

a Chance controlled universe. It is so in this sense: it cannot be what Christ says it is, namely, created, governed, and redeemed by him. In this one respect the cosmos is closed—there can be no such God as the Bible reveals. This is the universal negative of the open-minded man of philosophy and science.”<sup>3</sup> This was Charles Darwin’s metaphysic! Since providence implies creation, Darwin’s denial of creation was only the direct conclusion of his denial of providence. Escape from God’s controlling plan was the root issue. The “scientific” and cause and effect theory of natural selection was but a mask to cover the ultimate indeterminism he utilized to flee the claims of God upon him. For, as long as God did not control all of reality, Darwin had no reason to fear a final judgment.

### **Calvin’s Metaphysic**

All that remains to complete the contrast between Calvin and Darwin is to outline Calvin’s view of divine determinism. This will be a simple task – for Calvin’s doctrine is a simple doctrine. Yet in that simplicity, it is also sweeping. In fact, it is simple just *because* it is sweeping. For, Calvin wasted no effort in trying to carefully “apportion” control of the universe between God, on the one hand, and man or natural “law” on the other. He avoided the complexity of trying to maintain a God who is “sovereign” and in “control” and yet does not determine the course of history. No! In Calvin’s view, not one square inch of historical eventuation is left untouched by the all-determinative providence of God!

This means, positively, that, “...governing heaven and earth by his providence, [God] so regulates all things that nothing takes place without his deliberation. For when in The Psalms it is said that “he does whatsoever he wills” [Ps. 115:3; cf. 113(b): 3, Vg.], a certain deliberative will

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<sup>3</sup> *Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (In Defense of the Faith, vol. 1. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed), 13-14.

is meant.”<sup>4</sup> According to Calvin, “...providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events.”<sup>5</sup> This includes the movements and actions of the universe and its living creatures. “... [T]here is no erratic power, or action, or motion in creatures, but that they are governed by God’s secret plan in such a way that nothing happens except that which is knowingly and willingly decreed by him.”<sup>6</sup>

In light of this, Calvin staunchly denied any philosophy or doctrine that at all diminished the extent of God’s control. Obviously, for Calvin, there were no fortuitous or chance events. Yet, still he believed it was not enough simply to *say* that God is sovereign or the Ruler of the universe! No! He was anxious to “...refute the opinion (which almost universally obtains) that concedes to God some kind of blind and ambiguous motion, while taking from him the chief thing: that he directs everything by his incomprehensible wisdom and disposes it to his own end. And so in name only, not in fact, it makes God the Ruler of the universe because it deprives him of his control.” With deep philosophical insight he then remarks rhetorically, “What, I pray you, is it to have control but to so be in authority that you rule in a determined order those things over which you are placed?”<sup>7</sup> In other words, Calvin understood that in order to have anything but a thoroughly vacuous concept of control, the controller must exercise complete determination over everything in his control. Relying on Augustine, he says, “...if anything is left to fortune the world is aimlessly whirled about.”<sup>8</sup> If the door is even slightly opened to chance – because of the

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<sup>4</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion vol. I* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press), 200.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 202.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 201

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 202.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 208.

nature of chance and the uncertainty of what may emanate from it – Chance becomes “sovereign.” Yet this is exactly the position which Calvin knew belonged only to God!

### **The Contrast**

Having a better understanding of their respective metaphysical positions, we see that the battle between Calvin and Darwin is nothing more nor less than the battle of the ages between those who attribute complete control of the universe to God, and those who, by implication, attribute none. But is this a battle that simply will rage? Is there nothing more to be said? Are these merely equal options, decided between in accordance with the whims of the masses? Let us see!

A Calvinistic doctrine of providence is fundamental to the Christian faith. From a Christian perspective it is the glue, so to speak, of human experience. God’s all-encompassing plan provides the backdrop for continuity and meaning in the facts of our day-to-day lives. Again we quote Van Till on this point. “Every fact and every law in the created universe is brought into existence by God’s creation. Every fact and every law in the created universe continues to exist by virtue of the providence of God. Every fact and every law in the created universe accomplishes what it does accomplish by virtue of the plan or purpose of God. God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, through his Son Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> “All facts of history are what they are ultimately because of what God intends and makes them to be. Even that which is accomplished in human history through the instrumentality of men still happens by virtue of the plan of God.”<sup>10</sup> Every fact of experience, then, is what it is – has meaning and purpose – by virtue of its place in the plan of God!

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<sup>9</sup> *Christian-Theistic Evidences* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1978), 51.

<sup>10</sup> *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 28.

Yet this plan, in the nature of the case, has restrictions which natural men detest. Whoever designs the game sets the rules – and men hate God’s rules! Thus, they try to design their own game out of the “brute facts” of human experience. Instead of viewing the facts as preinterpreted in light of and by God’s sovereign plan, they view them as uninterpreted and brute emanation from the cosmic void. Now, with man at the helm, they endeavor to reconstruct a meaningful and purposeful reality for themselves out of these naturally meaningless and purposeless bits of “fact.” Through the legislation of the human mind, they seek to fit these unrelated and disconnected chunks of data into rational categories and relations in order to infuse them with meaning and significance. This they do, building, all along, upon an uncontrolled and uncontrollable foundation of pure indeterminateness and comprehensive chance.

But, is this an endeavor that will finally prove fruitful? Can brute facts be meaningfully categorized and related? In a long paragraph, Van Til gives us our answer.

On the assumptions of the natural man logic is a timeless impersonal principle, and the facts are controlled by chance. It is by means of universal timeless principles of logic that the natural man must, on his assumptions, seek to make intelligible assertions about the world of reality or chance.

With terminology somewhat more philosophical than we have used so far, Van Til again outlines for us the situation of the unbeliever, which we stated in the paragraph above. Because of his rejection of God’s pre-interpretation of the facts, natural man substitutes a “logic” or categorizing system which somehow operates in and upon the void of a chance universe. In contrast to the Christian view of man’s environment as wholly personal, the natural man

postulates a wholly *impersonal* system of rationality that “just is.” It is by means of this that he “seeks to make intelligible assertions about the world of reality or chance.”

Continuing on in the paragraph, Van Til points out that this is a hopeless project.

But this cannot be done without falling into self-contradiction. About chance no manner of assertion can be made. In its very idea it is the irrational. *And how are rational assertions to be made about the irrational?* If they are to be made then it is because the irrational is itself wholly reduced to the rational. That is to say if the natural man is to make any intelligible assertions about the world of “reality” or “fact” which, according to him is what it is for no rational reason at all, then he must make the virtual claim of rationalizing the irrational. To be able to distinguish one fact from another fact he must reduce all time existence, all factuality to immovable timeless being. But when he has done so he has killed all individuality and factuality as conceived of on his basis.

The situation, according to Van Til, is this. Natural man seeks to rationalize the irrational by means of an abstract or pie-in-the-sky logic and system of rationality. In order to be conceptually distinguished from each other, the individual non-conceptual facts of a chance universe are infused with meaning by attributing logical and categorical relations to them. For example, a brute fact “receives” the meaning of being brown because it is “placed” into the category of brown-ness. But as this process continues, the facts, insofar as they are rationalized, disappear into one immovable mass of essences which has nothing to do with the space-time facts of human experience. In the end, facts lose their individuality and, therefore, their factuality – and human experience disappears. The conclusion, then, is that the natural man must seek to rationally integrate the rational *together with* the irrational in order to preserve the reality of individual facts because *it is from the womb of an irrational chance that the facts derive their individuality*. He must simultaneously hold that reality is wholly and finally rational, *and* wholly and finally irrational. This is Van Til’s point in the remainder of the paragraph.

Thus the natural man must assert that all reality is non-structural in nature and on the other hand that all reality is structural in nature. He must even assert on the one hand that

all reality is non-structurable in nature and on the other hand that he himself had virtually structured all of it. *Thus all his predication is in the nature of the case self-contradictory.*<sup>11</sup>

This is the bottom line. Natural man's whole scheme of rationality is self-contradictory and utterly irrational. Upon his own assumptions, he cannot put forth one meaningful proposition, nor can he attribute one predicate to any fact whatsoever without contradicting himself. This is the verdict for all natural men – including Charles Darwin. Why? Because Darwin substituted a chance metaphysic for God's providential control over all things. In so doing, he embraced brute facts in place of God-interpreted facts, and he sought to rationalize the irrational by means of an abstract system of rationality.

The Christian and Calvinistic position paints a stark contrast. "Scripture teaches that every fact in the universe exists and operates by virtue of the plan of God. There are *no brute facts* for God. As to his own being, fact and interpretation are co-extensive. There are no hidden and unexplored possibilities in God. And as to the universe, God's interpretation logically precedes the denotation and the connotation of all facts of which it consists."<sup>12</sup> In light of this, as Calvinistic Christians, we can view reality as wholly rational, wholly meaningful and wholly purposeful.

### **The Possibility of Science**

So far, we have seen, first, that both Calvin and Darwin set forth metaphysical positions: Calvin a metaphysic of divine determinism, and Darwin a metaphysic of chance. Secondly, we have seen that while the metaphysic of Calvin was thoroughly rational, the metaphysic of Darwin was

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<sup>11</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed), 140-145, italics mine.

<sup>12</sup> Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1978), 51.

wholly irrational. Finally, then, we must briefly notice that while Calvin (and the other reformers) laid a firm foundation for science (and the Scientific Revolution), Darwin, that scientist of the modern age, on his own metaphysical assumptions, destroyed science.

Absolutely foundational to the scientific endeavor is the assumption that the universe is rational. For science to tell us anything, the world must consistently behave in an organized fashion. Nature must be uniform. On Calvin's view of divine determinism, we have a metaphysical basis for this essential presupposition of science. For, God has created the world as rational and uniform. He has decreed that the seasons should follow each other in succession and He holds all things by the word of His power. God so controls the course of natural history that there is not one chance molecule in His creation. On this point, Calvin states that God's "...general providence not only flourishes among creatures so as to continue the order of nature, but is by his wonderful plan adapted to a definite and proper end."<sup>13</sup>

Contrastingly, on Darwin's metaphysic, *every* molecule in the world is a chance molecule! On his view, the universe is fundamentally irrational and indeterminate. Consequently, we are left without any basis for assuming the uniformity of nature – neither in the future nor in the past. While we obviously have no reason to suppose that the course of natural events will remain the same in the future, this applies no less to the course of natural events in the past. We may have *thought* that nature operated uniformly over the last 100 years. But alas, our perspective of past events is captive to the way things are currently operating in this chance world – which may be, and for all we know, "probably" *is* different than the way things were operating five minutes ago. Moreover, neither do we have reason to suppose that any sort of rational relation (i.e. causation)

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<sup>13</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion vol. 1* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press), 206-7.

prevails between the chance and ultimately disconnected facts of the universe. Should we try to infuse such a relation into the brute facts of our experience, as we noted earlier, we could only do so at the cost of self-contradiction. Should we do so anyhow, we would without question be going beyond the limits of science! We see then that Darwin's metaphysic – and any other metaphysic of chance – destroys the possibility, fruitfulness and meaningfulness of science!

### **Conclusion of the Comparison between Calvin and Darwin**

In holding to the all-controlling providence of God, Calvin has given us, by means of biblical revelation, a firm foundation for meaning and purpose in reality. In denying the providence of God, Darwin has presented us with a universe “ruled” by Chance, thus undermining the possibility of science, and in general, the meaningfulness and purposefulness of human experience. In light of this we echo the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 where he asks rhetorically, “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?”<sup>14</sup> While we have seen that, as compared to Calvin's metaphysic of divine determinism, Darwin's metaphysic of chance is exceedingly foolish, we must realize that this is ultimately the wisdom of God making foolish the wisdom of this world. Praise be to God!

### **Application**

We have seen the errors of Charles Darwin and the consequences resulting from them. Anyone party to his errors is also party to their devastating implications. This should cause us great fear lest we ourselves have in some measure, whether wittingly or unwittingly, allowed his metaphysical assumptions to permeate our thinking. And yet I do fear because I am convinced

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<sup>14</sup> I Corinthians 1:20

that the Church, in America and abroad, *has* synthesized a chance metaphysic into a Biblical and Calvinistic view of God's sovereignty. While it is dangerous whenever anti-Christian thought seeps into the church, it is especially so in this case because of the nature of chance metaphysics. For, as we have seen, when you open the door to an ever so small amount of chance, "the world is aimlessly whirled about." Thus, if we have watered down a biblical conception of God's sovereignty with the poison of chance metaphysics, as I believe we have, we have great cause for alarm. For, he who believes in a God whose sovereignty fails to cover all reality believes in a God whose sovereignty covers none of reality! In light of this, let us make plain our deviation in order that we may correct and reform it.

Attempts to "adjust" the extent of God's sovereignty in order to make concession to man's will are not new. They are centuries – even millennia old. Yet, unfortunately, in their long duration they have not diminished. In contemporary Christianity, advocates of the partial sovereignty of man are by far the majority. So what is to be said? It is important to point out, at the outset, that advocates of these views – such as Arminians and non-Reformed Evangelicals – for the most part do not intend or think that they at all diminish God's control over all things. This is crucial to recognize. Now, while I do believe that this is what their view of man's will implies, to think they are aware of or would agree with these implications would be grossly uncharitable.

It is also important to understand what this contingency of true Christians does and does not believe. They do not believe that God has, from eternity past, "...decreed whatsoever comes to pass."<sup>15</sup> In their view such determinism would destroy man's free will. As already mentioned, neither do they believe that a denial of Calvin's doctrine of divine determinism takes away from

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<sup>15</sup> *London Baptist Confession of Faith*

God's sovereignty. They are eager to proclaim God's "control" over all things – as any believer who derives hope from God's promises would be; yet they do not think that is necessary for God to be the Determiner of all things in order to be the Controller of all things.

Finally, it is important to recognize that this is the crucial point: Can God providentially control all things in a universe in which He does not determine everything that comes to pass? With Calvin, we maintain that He cannot. The majority of contemporary Christians with Arminius believe that He can. Our contention, then, is this. A universe, in which *not* everything operates in accordance with God's foreordained plan, is a universe in which chance is operative – insofar as God's decrees are not. And a universe in which chance is partially operative is a universe in which God cannot be trusted nor taken at His Word. Of course, this does not settle the debate. The obvious and immediate reply is that allowing room for man's undetermined will does not at all open the door to chance. For, God, in His "sovereignty," has chosen to allow *men* to choose from a limited number of options which He knows<sup>16</sup> will not interfere with the *determined* elements of His plan and purpose. He has let out man's leash, so to speak. This need not open the door to chance at all; for, *man will decide* the outcome in this, his limited sphere of influence! Thus God's ability to control the outcome of the universe and keep His promises is not jeopardized.

Yet this is precisely the point! We maintain here, as earlier in the case of Darwin, that any event outside the pre-determined plan of God is a chance event. To say that, instead of being the results

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<sup>16</sup> This solution assumes that foreknowledge does not imply foreordination. I think this a faulty assumption. How could God know something beforehand unless the object of His knowledge was certain beforehand? Foreknowledge implies certainty in advance. The obvious question then is, "From whence does the object of God's knowledge derive its certainty in advance?" The only possible answer is that it derives its certainty from God's foreordination. Thus, in my opinion, this solution assumes what it is trying to avoid!

of chance, certain events are the result of man's free will is exceedingly unhelpful. As we argued above, any fact or event which is not God-determined, and thus not God-created, and thus not God-interpreted, must derive its interpretation and meaning from the mind of man, which, as we also saw above, is a schizophrenic enterprise. Thus, we maintain that man's will is completely unintelligible and meaningless insofar as, and as long as, it is not seen as operating in accordance with the meaningful plan of God; and if meaningless and unintelligible, man's actions have no significance, whether causal or otherwise. And all events without any such significance, if "events" they may be called, are chance events! Thus our concern with any position which views man's actions as operating outside the determined plan of God, is that it, by implication, opens the doors to chance, and thus, to all the devastating consequences of Darwin's chance metaphysic.

Of course, we cannot overlook that this position – namely, that God cannot determine the free actions of men – was generated out of objections to the Augustinian and Calvinistic view that God can and does do so. Calvin's view, it has been argued over and over again, would undermine a truly free will of man, would thus undermine his responsibility, and would thus make God the author of sin. My response to the first objection is simple. I do believe that man has a free will (I'm not sure what it would mean to have an "unfree" will!<sup>17</sup>) and that all of his actions are the direct outflow of his desires. And yet I also believe that God sovereignly, in accordance with His holy character, pre-determines the acts, the free acts, of men. My response to the second and third objections is also simple. The necessary and sufficient condition for human responsibility is freedom from coercion. Because God does not bring about His sovereign plan through coercion, men *are* responsible for their actions and God is not. Now, I do not

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, I am not challenging Luther's point in his pamphlet, *The Bondage of the Will*.

understand how God brings these things about – how He determines the free actions of men, and does so without coercion. But, neither do I understand how He created the world from nothing. Nevertheless, my lack of understanding is not because there is inherent contradiction in these doctrines – it is because God is the Creator and I am but a creature!

### **Conclusion of Our Application**

As we have seen, the Arminian and non-Reformed understanding of the interaction between God's sovereignty and man's will, if taken to its consistent end, results in the schizophrenia of chance metaphysics. But even worse, it runs the risk of, and by implication, does destroy the Christian faith. Such a serious claim must and can be substantiated. We believe this to be the case for the following reasons. First, this position grants man a measure of autonomy; second, it therefore limits God's authority; third, it undermines His law; and thus, finally, man's need for a savior. Let us examine each of these points briefly.

The Arminian understanding of man's free will grants man a measure of autonomy because it allows for one area of human experience in which man is not confronted with the plan, and therefore the claims of God. If there is one area of reality which man is not obliged to interpret in terms of God's plan for human history (which includes the final judgment), there is no reason, then, why he should not seek to interpret all of reality apart from God's plan.<sup>18</sup> As Van Til put it, if there is but one channel on the radio of human experience with the call letters C-H-A-N-C-E, where the natural man hears no reference to God's sovereign plan, he will always tune into that

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<sup>18</sup> Van Til notes that this has devastating implication for the relevance of Christian education. He says, "With Romanism the Arminian view accepts a principle of interpretation for human life which comes in part from man himself. Then we have no fully intelligible philosophy of education. We cannot clearly show that the non-Christian view is wrong. We cannot maintain that God must be central in education; we cannot show why education should be Christ-centered." *Essays on Christian Education* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 75.

channel. If chance controls but one channel, man has no need to fear a final judgment – for who knows what may come to pass? In this way we grant men a little autonomy, and “...a little autonomy involves absolute autonomy. A little reality set free from the plan of God involves all reality set free from the plan of God.”<sup>19</sup>

Second, God’s authority is diminished (if not denied) because He is up against a chance element in reality and may not be able to control the course of history. “A God surrounded by Chance cannot speak with authority. He would be speaking into a vacuum. His voice could not be heard.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, thirdly, anything He says, any law He gives is of little significance. God may not be able to punish us if we disobey, and worse, He may not be able to bless us if we obey. Finally, if God’s law is not binding, man may not have sinned, and is, therefore, not fallen. In fact, if God’s standards are not binding, man may autonomously set up alternative standards in terms of which he certainly has *not* sinned! And if not fallen, there is nothing from which he need be saved. Even if man was in need of salvation, God does not control history, and, thus, His salvific purposes may be thwarted. In this manner, the need for, and the certainty of salvation are virtually denied. “All of this results from the ...insistence that man must have a measure of autonomy and this keeps within him a little of the poison which it is the very business of Christianity to destroy.”<sup>21</sup>

At every point then, the Christian faith has been undermined. For, God *does* reign over all things and we *are* His creatures. His law *is* the final standard by which all men will be judged. We *are*

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<sup>19</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 112.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 242.

<sup>21</sup> Van Til, *Essays on Christian Education* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 75.

fallen creatures in need of a Savior. And, God *will* sovereignly save those upon whom He has set His love, has regenerated, and to whom He has imparted the gift of faith.

### **Overall Conclusion**

We have compared, and I hope successfully, the metaphysical outlooks of Calvin and Darwin.

We have also noted how Darwinistic metaphysics has trickled down into Christian theology. Yet all of this is to no avail if we miss the root issue. And the root issue is this: is man autonomous or is he subject to the decrees and authority of God. Calvin held that man is subject to the decrees of God. Darwin held that he is autonomous. And, while I'm confident that they sincerely believe contrary to Darwin, my fear is that, taken consistently, the Arminian and non-Reformed understanding of man's freedom *implies* agreement with Darwin. They, along with the Darwins of this world, claim that Augustine and Calvin do injustice to man's will. But, as we have seen, it is just this Augustinian and Calvinistic position that is the only position for those who are *truly* concerned about the freedom and significance of man's will. Either man's will operates in the insignificance and meaninglessness of the cosmic vacuum of chance, or it operates in accordance with the wonderful plan of God.

In a long quote, Van Til insightfully gets to the heart of it all.

“The choices of men take place and have their significance in relation to the task that God has assigned to man as a whole. These choices are either an acceptance or a rejection of the responsibility of performing this task. But both the acceptance and the rejection take place in relation to the same task. And there would be no such thing as a common task in relationship to which the choices of men could have their genuine meaning unless there were one plan of God according to which all things come to pass.

On the other hand there would be no truly significant choices of men, either by way of accepting or by way of rejecting the common task of mankind unless these choices are themselves subordinate to the one plan of God. There would be nothing in relationship to

which human choice could take place if it were not for the common plan of God back of all things, and if it were not for the common task that God according to this one plan has set for men. Without this all things would be indeterminate. There would be and could be no culture, no civilization, no history.”<sup>22</sup>

We see, then, that God has decreed an assignment and law for man to obey, and He does have a comprehensive plan in terms of which this task and law have purpose and significance. Thus, whether Augustinian or semi-Pelagian, Reformed or Arminian in theology, we all face the same crucial question. It is a question that we must ask ourselves everyday if we are truly concerned about purging our minds from any remains of non-Christian thought. The question is this: “Do I, as revealed in the way I live my life and the choices I make, truly believe with Calvin that God’s sovereign authority and law extends to every area of life, or do I, with Darwin, hold to some measure of the autonomy of man?” Where do you stand: with Calvin or Darwin?

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<sup>22</sup> *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 120.