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The Freedom of God

Scout Victoria Powell

Introduction

The subject of God's freedom is an interesting topic that has been discussed by great philosophers over the years. The traditional theistic belief is that the God of the Bible is a free God, but the nature of his freedom has been greatly debated. In this paper, I am going to argue that God is simultaneously free and yet bound by his creation. I will be defending Friedrich Lohmann's article, "God's Freedom: Free to Be Bound" to show that God uses his freedom for his glory, and through this exercise of freedom, he becomes self-restricted.

Do Christians Believe God is Free?

In Friedrich Lohmann's article, "God's Freedom: Free to be Bound," he writes that in the Old Testament, the freedom of God is heavily emphasized throughout the Scriptures.¹ For example, when Moses comes upon the burning bush and asks for the name of the one speaking to him, God replied, "I am who I am,"² revealing that even the name of God declares his divine freedom. God's

¹ Friedrich Lohmann. "God's Freedom: Free to Be Bound." *Modern Theology*. 34, no. 3 (July 2018): 370.

² Exodus 3:15.

freedom is also seen in his words and actions, such as when God tells Moses that he decides to whom he will show grace and mercy. Paul also brings the concept of God's freedom up in his letter to the Romans,³ revealing that he fully supports the idea that God has full freedom of choice. Thus, throughout the Scriptures, we see a theme of God's people emphasizing his sovereign freedom of choice and actions.⁴

An extremely important point to observe when considering freedom is the concept of personhood, which can be defined as the ability to make free decisions, as seen in Immanuel Kant's definition.⁵ Kant explained that a person should be thought of as an end in and of itself as contrasted with a person as a means to an end. The Bible sees God as a person rather than an object; an object lacks freedom and only a person has the capacity of having free choice. Thus, as Lohmann states, "the theistic idea of God as a person therefore is immediately connected with God's freedom."⁶ This statement raises an intriguing question: is God free to do whatever he wants whenever he wants?

³ Romans 9:15.

⁴ Lohmann, "God's Freedom," 371.

⁵ Ibid, 371.

⁶ Ibid, 371.

Omnipotence and Negative and Positive Freedom

Traditional theistic belief holds that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent; understanding the definition of omnipotence is key to understanding God's freedom. The definition that Thomas Aquinas gives for omnipotence does not state that God can do anything conceivable, but rather, that God can create and make to exist anything which is possible and does not contradict his divine attributes.⁷ This concept of God's omnipotence is extremely important to understand with regard to his freedom; he does not have the freedom to do impossible things such as create a circle square, but he does have the freedom to do anything that is possible and coincides with who he is.

While there are many ways to understand the concept of freedom, one important distinction is between positive and negative freedom. The type that emphasizes freedom from coercion is negative; the less influence others have on your decisions, the freer you are. In this view, the only way one can be truly free is if there is absolutely no coercion by others (infinite). Furthermore, even if one lacks possibilities, such as Robinson Crusoe on his island, that person has the capacity to be genuinely free as long as there is no coercion by others.⁸ Oppositely, a positive understanding of freedom holds that freedom is found in

⁷ Brian Davies. *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Contra Gentiles: A Guide and Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2016. Accessed April 12, 2020.

⁸ Lohmann, "God's Freedom," 371-372.

opportunity. This view of freedom states that you become freer the more options that are available to you; positive freedom relies heavily on the idea of self-realization.⁹

So, which type of freedom is the kind that God has? While God's exceedingly complex nature consists of both positive and negative freedom, it appears that the Christian idea of God's freedom is largely negative. This is seen in the creation of the world; God created the world and there was no coercion on God during the process. However, it is important to note that the Christian concept of freedom consists of more than just a lack of coercion. God was completely free *from* any hindrance, and because of this, he had the freedom *to* create what he wanted in the world through his loving personality.¹⁰

God's Tie to the World

While it is accepted that God is free, the nature of his freedom still puzzles some due to the fact that God is also bound to his creation. Brandon Gallaher explains in his book, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology*, that God freely becomes bound to his creation through the act of sending his Son, Jesus, to earth in flesh.¹¹ While traditional Christian theology upholds the concept

⁹ Ibid., 372.

¹⁰ Ibid., 373.

¹¹ Brandon Gallaher. *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

that God is completely free (infinitely free), it also affirms that God's love for his creation can never end because of Christ. God has eternally chosen for the eternal Son to be slain for the world, and thus, Christian theology must also uphold the idea that the created world is now inseparable from the Holy Trinity.¹² Gallaher argues that if there was no world, there could be no Christ, therefore leading to a tight tension and balance between God's freedom and the necessity of the world.

God has bound himself to his creation many times, not just through the incarnation. One example of this is found in the Old Testament when God promises to Noah and his family to never send a flood to destroy the earth ever again. Lohmann argues that God still has the power to send a flood but due to the legally binding covenant he made with Noah, he can no longer commit the action of sending a flood to the whole world again.¹³ Another example of God giving up his freedom is when he makes a covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai. He freely chose the Israelites which was to some extent humiliating to himself since they were the "fewest of all peoples;"¹⁴ out of his love for his people, he promised to redeem them. This demonstrates how God's covenants with his people create a free self-restriction for his glory.

¹² Ibid., 6.

¹³ Lohmann, "God's Freedom," 380.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 7:7.

Furthermore, God is bound by his creation because humans were created by him in his image. In Genesis 1:26-27, this very idea is shown when God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”¹⁵ God created humans for his glory, and this is the perfect example of how God through the exercising of his freedom became self-restricted. When he created man in his image, he became eternally bound to his creation; his eternal glorification resulted in his eternal self-restriction. His image being in man indicates his eternal tie to man.

The Freedom of Jesus

One objection that may appear against Lohmann’s work when considering the freedom of God is the question of whether Jesus was able to be truly free or not on account of being fully God and fully man. Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe take on this question in their article, “Freedom and the Incarnation;” they explain that Jesus had two wills, and they state these two wills as being his divine will and his human will.¹⁶ These authors outline three key reasons why Christians should hold to the belief that Jesus was fully free in his human will. The first reason they outline states that one thing we as humans find so key to our humanity is the freedom of our human will. If Christ was like us and fully human except in the ways of sin (as found in the writings of the Council of Chalcedon and Hebrews

¹⁵ Genesis 1:26-27.

¹⁶ Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe. “Freedom and the Incarnation.” *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 11 (2016): 743-756.

4:15) then surely, he would have been free to his human will.¹⁷ While Jesus had the ability to sin as a man, he never committed a sin. Thus, there is moral weight to his abstaining from sin; Jesus was the only one who could provide salvation for humanity.

The second reason Pawl and Timpe give for supporting Jesus being fully free in his human will is that the early church councils did claim this freedom (such as the Lateran Council). These councils revealed that belief in the freedom of Jesus' human nature was essential to salvation; if he did not have the ability to sin, then he would not be able to overcome sin. While Jesus had the capacity to sin in his human will, he prevailed and never gave in to temptation, therefore beating sin and death and providing the opportunity for salvation. Thus, if one wishes to be in line with early church Christology, the belief and affirmation of the freedom of Christ's human will is crucial.¹⁸ Third, the authors point out that the tradition of the Church is shown through the thoughts of many important theologians such as Alfeyev, Augustine, Aquinas, and John of Damascus. These theologians conclude that Jesus did in fact have two wills, the divine and human, and that he operated freely in both of these wills.¹⁹ While church authorities have

¹⁷ Ibid., 745.

¹⁸ Ibid., 745.

¹⁹ Ibid., 746.

the capacity to be faulty in their positions, the matter concerning Jesus' ability work with both a divine and human will is essential doctrine to Christianity. Christian faith holds to the concept that God would not allow this doctrine to be misrepresented. Thus, both Christian tradition and Scripture reveal that Jesus was a fully free man operating with a divine and human will simultaneously. Due to this conclusion, Lohmann's argument for a free God remains intact.

Gracious Autonomy

God's freedom can be understood in the way of autonomy; in the divine freedom possessed by God, he chooses to restrict himself by binding himself to the law and covenant. Lohmann states, "It is God's own free decision to restrict God's own freedom of choice by making a covenant with Israel and humanity. God's autonomy is *gracious* autonomy. Whereas human beings are self-determined by the moral law, God actively determines Godself by decreeing and acting with the purpose of salvation."²⁰ This covenant to the world orients the actions that God takes, therefore, he is autonomous, bound to his self-given law. This concept greatly reflects Kant's concept of belief of freedom as autonomy; however, there are two differences in the theological idea of God as autonomous and Kant's idea of human autonomy.

²⁰ Lohmann, "God's Freedom," 381.

First, it is crucial to note that the Kantian moral person discovers herself bound by a law that was not invented by herself. Kant believes that to be subjected to the moral law is part of human nature as a whole and it is inescapable to the human condition; no human can live without the concept of morality. Thus, human autonomy is a given autonomy.²¹ Second, according to Kant, the moral law and natural inclinations of humans are in tight tension. Differently, (according to Christian theism) God completely follows the ability to love when he restricts his own power, as seen on the cross.²² The image of Jesus on the cross is the ultimate image of the way that God exercises his freedom; there is no tension in God's will and the will to love, but rather, they are one and the same.

Incompatibilism

An important note on Lohmann's work is that he brings up the concept of compatibilism. He mentions an objection from the stance of a compatibilist, stating that God could not be truly free because he too is held to antecedent causal conditions just as compatibilists believe humans are. However, he brings up the argument: (1) in C, A is the best action for God to do, (2) in C God knows that A is the best action, wants to do A, and is able to do A, (3) if in C God knows that A is the best action, wants to do A, and is able to do A, then God does A in C.²³

²¹ Ibid., 381.

²² Ibid., 381.

²³ Lohmann, "God's Freedom," 434.

While many state that this argument proves God does not have freedom, Lohmann explains that this argument can be true and God's freedom still be maintained. He states, "...it is nevertheless in virtue of *his own nature* that he knows that A is the best action, wants to do A, and is able to do A. There is no long chain stretching back to things separated from him that give him this constellation of knowledge, desire, and ability; it is due to his own knowledge and power and goodness."²⁴ Thus, God's freedom remains intact through this explanation due to the fact that God is not limited by time.

Conclusion

I have defended Friedrich Lohmann's article, "God's Freedom: Free to be Bound," supporting his belief that God is simultaneously free and yet restricted in his actions. I argued that God's free self-restriction leads to his eternal glory. Through God's gracious autonomy, he gave us Jesus as Savior of the world who was also free in both his divine will and human will. In conclusion, God is beautifully free to be bound.

²⁴ Ibid., 434.

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