

GOD, Sin, and Gordon H. Clark

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.

WCF 5:4

Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptation of Satan, sinned, in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin, God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory.

WCF 6:1

Q19: What is God's providence towards the angels?

A19: God by his providence permitted some of the angels, wilfully and irrecoverably, to fall into sin and damnation, limiting and ordering that, and all their sins, to his own glory; and established the rest in holiness and happiness; employing them all, at his pleasure, in the administrations of his power, mercy, and justice.

LC 19

“Permission in the case of the Almighty has no specific meaning.”

Gordon Clark

What is God's relationship to sin? How does God cause sin? Does God cause sin? These are questions that have been asked since the time of Augustine and beyond. In a context where God's foreordination of all things, even the sins of men, these questions have especially been important and so objects of considerable thought. Arminianism resolves the questions into God's foreknowledge; thereby denying the basic question, "does God cause sin?" God looks down the corridors of times and in response to the choices of man, he plans accordingly. If God foresees by a bare prescience that a given man has chosen to believe, God then determines to glorify that man. They will call this divine predestination. It is a predestination of all things according to his bare prescience. Invoking concepts of will of antecedence and consequence, they effectively make God a master chess player working on response to man's moves on the cosmic chessboard of life and reality. Here God is completely reactive. God, has created this world and set in motion a number of plans, for sure. But fundamentally, God is reactive to man's responses. Free will is the ultimate determiner in the universe, to which God is even bound.

Molinism with its middle knowledge, wherein God looked down the corridors of an infinite number of possible worlds, and then chose one that produced maximal freedom in harmony with maximal divine determinism, does not solve the problem either. Here too, ultimately, God does not cause sin. In both Arminianism¹ and Molinism, God only permits sin, and this permission is a bare permission. God, as it were, is constrained by some external force, viz., the inviolable free will of man, wherein he may not interfere with man's choice to sin. He must merely tolerate it. It is an unwilling permission on his part. In no way does God's will active or causal in the event of sin.²

On the other hand, some "calvinists" have argued that indeed God does cause sin, even in such a way as to deny that in any sense that God permits sin. For these "calvinists" God not only ordains sin, but mysteriously causes it in an absolutely non-permissive manner. In terms of the history of the Christian tradition, this is a relatively new development within calvinist circles. Herman Hoeksema, when he appeared before the Synod of Kalamazoo in 1924, passionately expressed himself in language reminiscent of Luther, demanding that if he is forced to ever chose between God and man, he will always choose God. This led Hoeksema to categorically deny that God in anyway permits sin. For him, in boldness of language that should shock the sensitive Reformed believer, God causes sin in a straightline manner. Hoeksema is not alone in this denial of divine permission of sin. Gordon Clark, too, expressed the same sentiment.

It is these sentiments that I want to address in this paper. For Clark has made them known in his commentary on the Westminster Confession. Calvin, following the great Augustine before him, argued that God does not just barely permit sin but that God willingly permits sin. This point is simply demonstrated by the fact that as Augustine said, the will of God is the necessity of all things. Nothing comes to pass but by the will of God. So in this minimal sense, God does willingly permit sin, not just unwillingly, or barely, does he permit sin. Calvin, even more so than Augustine, expresses himself in even stronger language. For him, God joins permission of sin with an activity of God, which is the expression of God's foreordination of all things.³ The very language of our confession expresses this very Calvinian language. God, says the confession:

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends.⁴

¹Herein I include all sub-forms of Arminianism, such as Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism.

²Herein the terms we use must be carefully nuanced. Its been a standard idea in Medieval and Protestant Scholastic teaching that God never directly wills sin. Sin can never be the direct object of God's volition in and of itself. God cannot will sin, in the same manner has he may will righteousness. Hypercalvinists and some modern day Supralapsarians speak and write as if God can indeed directly will, i.e., have a volition for sin, directly, in a symmetrical manner has he may will righteousness.

³See below for a brief delineation of what this means for Calvin.

⁴Westminster Confession of Faith, 5:4.

It is important to note the structure of the proposition here, archaic as it is. God's providence extends itself even to the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden, and all other sins of men and angels, so that in this providence, even sin comes under its purview, but not by a bare permission, but by a permission that is also well married to a bounding, ordering, and governing of God's sovereign providence.

Yet now it is important to note. Though the Confession affirms that God willingly permits sin, even bounds and governs sin, he in no way is the proper author of the sin. Man and man alone is the author of his own sin: "yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin."⁵

The Reformed, in its affirmation of God's divine ordination of all things, even sinful things, self-consciously rejects the idea that God is the author of sin, or the approver of sin. Here even Clark stands on solid ground when he affirms that though God can be the cause of sin, in terms of ultimate causation, he is never the author of sin. For authorship entails *source*, whereas *cause* does not necessarily entail this.⁶ One can be the cause of an thing, even though he be not the actual author of the thing. That is, using classical causal taxonomy, God is the ultimate cause of all things, even sin, but man is the proximate cause of his sin. The idea that God in no way authors sin is important to maintain in order maintain God's holiness. God in no way tempts or leads men into sin. As Turretin says pithily:

In this question, which all confess to be the most intricate and difficult among those agitated concerning providence, two extremes occur which are equally dangerous and to be avoided. First in defect, wherein an otiose permission about sins is ascribed to God. The other in excess, when the causality of sin is charged upon God. The former clashes with the providence of God, but the latter with his justice and holiness. Into the former, the Pelagians, who refer the method of God's providence about evil to a bare and idle permission, run (as if he put forth no action in reference to it, but only indifferently beheld and permitted it). On the latter, however, the Manichaeans, Simonians and Priscillianists formerly struck who made God the cause of wickedness and of sins. This sinners readily seize to excuse their crimes: as Homer's Agamemnon, "I am not to be blamed, but Jupiter and fate"... and Lyconides in the *Aulularia* of Plautus, "God was the instigator, I believe the gods wished it" (*The Pot of Gold* [Loeb, 1:310-11]). This impiety is indulged by the Libertine of the present time.

The orthodox hold the mean between these two extremes, maintaining that the providence of God is so occupied about sin as neither to idly to permit it (as the Pelagians think) nor to efficiently to produce it (as the Libertines suppose) but efficaciously order and direct it.⁷

Gordon Clark, however, is faced with a crucial question-problem that he never addresses. If God does not permit sin in anyway, and yet he is not the author of sin, how then does sin come to pass and how then is God not responsible for its production?⁸ Stated another way, there are only two conceivable modes of causation of sin, direct and indirect. Permission entails indirect causation of sin, by definition. If permission is denied, then all forms of indirect causation of sin are denied. If that is so, then only a direct causation of sin is left. Direct causation of sin entails a non-permissive causation of sin, which can only amount to an efficiently direct causation of sin. How then is God not the author and the responsible party for sin?

Thus, in response to the ideas of men like Gordon Clark, this paper will survey some of the Reformed attempts to explain the relationship of divine foreordination and providence with the bounded permission of sin. This confession will

⁵Ibid.

⁶Gordon Clark, *Religion, Reason and Revelation* (Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1986), pp., 195-24, specifically, pp., 237-238.

⁷Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1992), Vol 1., p., 515.

⁸This dilemma is even more acute for Herman Hoeksema who affirms a straightline causation of sin.

detail what Clark says in his commentary on the Confession and some of his comments elsewhere, then set out a number of traditional responses to his question-problem.

Firstly, Clark says:

God's relation to the sinful acts of men, the stumbling block that so many people find in Chapter 3, is considered again in 4 of chapter 5. The sphere of providence extends to the first sin of Adam and to all other sins of angels and men. God's relation to sin is not that of bare permission; in fact as Calvin shows in his *Institutes*, 2.4.3, and 3.23.8, permission in the case of the Almighty has no specific meaning.⁹

Later, in his discussion of chapter 6, section 1, of the confession he also says:

This first section also states that God, in his own glory as previously explained at length, was pleased to permit our first parents to disobey his command.

Most people would say that the word *permit* is a softer expression than the word *ordain*. Some would even say that permission half puts sin out of God's control. But we cannot permit anyone to suppose that chapter 6 contradicts chapters 3 and 4. Not being infallible, the men at Westminster may have fallen into some slight inconsistency somewhere; but it can hardly be maintained that they anywhere contradicted the doctrine of the divine decree.

It is better to understand the word permit as merely a convenient linguistic expression. Indeed, permission as it is used in human affairs is inappropriate to the divine omnipotence and sovereignty. Of course, it is quite true to say that God permitted Adam to sin; but if by this we intend to deny that God foreordained Adam's sin, we are quite mistaken. God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass.

For reasons such as this, John Calvin wrote: "Here they [those who object to the divine decrees] recur to the distinction between will and permission, and insist that God permits the destruction of the impious, but does not will it. But what reason shall we assign for his permitting it, but because it is his will?" (*Institutes*, 3.23.8; cf 2.4.3). This is clearly a sufficient reply.

In his book, *Religion, Reason and Revelation* he discusses in more detail his concept of divine permission of sin. He first brings our attention to the metaphor of the lifeguard sitting on high chair, watching as some a boy drown in the sea. The life-guard may shout advice, causation him, and yet do nothing actively to save the drowning boy. "The guard merely permitted him to go in and permitted him to drown."¹⁰ Clark then notes that "permission of evil as contrasted with positive causality does not relieve a life-guard from responsibility. Similarly, if God merely permits men to be engulfed in sin of their own free wills, the original objections of Voltaire and Professor Patterson are not thereby met."¹¹ A little later he affirms,

Not only are free will and permission irrelevant to the problem of evil, but rather the idea of permission has no intelligible meaning. It is quite within the range of possibility for a life-guard to permit a man to drown. This permission, however, depends on the fact that the ocean's undertow is beyond the guard's control. If the guard had some giant suction device which he operated so as to engulf the boy, one would call it murder, not permission. The idea of permission is possible only where there is an independent force, either the boy's force or the ocean's force. But this is not the situation in the case of God and the universe. Nothing in the universe

⁹Gordon Clark, *What do Presbyterians Believe?*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1965), p., 67. Perhaps this work should rather be entitled, *What do Hypercalvinists believe?* I will show below that Clark has misread Calvin in this.

¹⁰Clark, *Revelation*, pp., 204-5.

¹¹Ibid, p., 205.

can be independent of the Omnipotent Creator, for him, we live and move and have our being. Therefore, the idea of permission makes no sense when applied to God.¹²

Once again, he cites Calvin, though in more detail; yet to the same effect as before.

Before I turn to surveying some of the commentaries on the Westminster confessional documents, it will serve us well to introduce as a theological baseline a word or two from Francis Turretin:

The orthodox hold the mean between these extremes, maintaining that the providence of God is so occupied about sin as neither idly to permit it (as the Pelagians think) nor efficiently to produce it (as the Libertines suppose), but efficaciously to order and direct it. However, in order that this may be readily understood, we must treat of it a little more distinctly.

Second, this permission must not be conceived negatively, as if it was a mere keeping back (anergia) or cessation of his will and providence in evil works (by which God, sitting as it were on a watchtower, should behold only the event of the permitted action and who, therefore, would be left uncertain and doubtful-as the old Pelagians thought and as their followers of the present day hold obtruding upon us the comment of an otiose and inert permission; cf. Bellarmine, "God does not hold himself towards sins positively to will or nill, but negatively not to will" ("De amissione gratiae et statu peccati," 2.16 in *Opera* 4:107). But it must be conceived positively and affirmatively; not simply that God does not will to hinder sin (which is an otiose negation), but that he wills not to hinder (which is an efficacious affirmation). Thus the permission involves a positive act of the secret will by which God designedly and willingly determined not to hinder sin, although he may be said to nill it as to the revealed will of approbation. In this sense, our divines do not refuse to employ the word "permission" with the Scriptures. And if at any time they reject it (as Calvin, Beza and others), they understand it in the Pelagian sense of otiose "permission" which takes away from God his own right and sets up the idol of free will in its place. Hence Beza: "if by the word permission is meant this distinction (to wit, since God does not act in evil, but gives them up to Satan and their own lusts) that I repudiate not in the least. But if permission is opposed to will, this I reject as false and absurd; its falsity appearing from this, that if God unwillingly permits anything, he is not certainly God, i.e., Almighty; but if he is said to permit anything as not caring, how much do we differ from Epicureanism? It remains, there, fore, that he willingly permits what he permits. Will then is not opposed to permission" (*A Little Book of Christian Questions and Responses*, Q. 179 [trans. K.M. Summers, 1986], pp. 72-73).¹³

For Turretin, it is it not meaningless or intelligible to speak of a divine permission, but indeed, it is of utmost importance to use this terminology.

In his discussion of chapter 5:4 of the Confession, G.I. Williamson only briefly attends to the question-problem of God's ordination of sin. While he affirms that God is not the author of sin and evil he does cite Isaiah 45:7, "I form the light and create the darkness. I make peace and create evil; I the LORD do all these things."¹⁴ Williamson then affirms that Scripture is bold and unembarrassed to speak of God's sovereignty, yet Scripture also boldly affirms that God in no way is the author of sin. While this is true, Williamson has not addressed the problem. The confession in the above sections to sin and evil directly, not so much to calamity and physical distress. Thus, Williamson is not helpful in dealing with the problem-question of sin and evil in terms of divine permission and ordination.

¹²Ibid. Later he will even boldly assert "even Jonathan Edwards in spite of Calvin, still spoke of God's permission of sin." p., 239.

¹³Turretin, *Ibid*, Vol., 1, pp 516-7.

¹⁴G.I., Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1964, pp., 49-50. The nature of the parallelism in Isaiah informs us that the prophet is speaking of physical calamity as the evil he speaks of.

As we turn to Shaw, we see a more substantive answer. He says well:

That the providence of God is concerned about the sinful actions of creatures must be admitted... At the same time, it is indisputable that God cannot be the author nor the approver of sin. To solve the difficulty connected with this point, theologians distinguish between an action and its quality. The action, abstractly considered, is from God, for no action can be performed without the concurrence of Providence; but the sinfulness of the action proceeds entirely from the creature. As to the manner in which the providence of God is concerned about the sinful actions of creatures, it is usually stated, that God permits them, that he limits them, and that he overrules them for the accomplishment of his own holy ends. But the full elucidation of this abstruse subject so as to remove every difficulty, surpasses human faculties. We are certain that God is concerned in all the actions of his creatures; we are equally certain that God cannot be the author of sin, and here we ought to rest.¹⁵

Later in his discussion of chapter 6, section 1, he says:

Is [sic?] it is asked, How could upright man be seduced to commit this great transgression? The answer is, Man, though perfectly holy, was mutable. He had the power to stand, but was liable to fall. God left him to the freedom of his own will, and that freedom he abused. No doubt God could have prevented his fall if he had pleased, by giving such influences of his Spirit as would have been absolutely effectual to hinder it; but this he was under no obligation to do. He did not withdraw from man that ability with which he had furnished him for his duty, nor did he infuse any vicious inclinations into his heart,--he only withheld that further grace that would have infallibly prevented his fall. If it be inquired, Why God permitted the fall of man to take place? "Probably the best answer ever given to this question in the present world, is that which was given by Christ concerning one branch of the divine dispensations to mankind: 'Even so, Father; for it seemed good in thy sight.'¹⁶

While all that Shaw says is perfectly true, he does not explain how Divine Foreordination is compatible with permission of sin. It is surely not that we can expect to answer this question-problem exhaustively, but we can have some hints regarding the mechanics of the relationship.

David Dickson is credited as writing the first commentary on the Westminster Confession. The work *Truths Victory over Error* has historically been attributed to him. His comments on this section of the Confession are brief but pointed. The structure of his commentary is by question-answer format. His first key question is:

Does God direct, uphold, dispose and govern all creatures, their actions, and all things from the greatest to the least? Yes. Well then do not the Socinians, Arminians and that great Philosopher Durandus, which others called the Epicureans err, who deny that God preserves all things immediately: to be the immediate cause of all things, which fall out: to govern things, which are contingent, and he free acts of the will of men, and evil actions? Yes.

After confuting the denial of this question, he then asks the second key question:

Doth the Almighty Power, unsearchable wisdom and finite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his Providence, that is extendeth itself, even to the first fall, and all other sins of Angels and Men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it, most wise, and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own how ends? Yes.

Well then, do not the Lutherans, Papists, Arminians and Socinians err, who maintain, that the Lord concurs only to sinful actions, by a bare, naked, and idle permission? Yes

Now, Dickson's answer is:

¹⁵Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith*, (Inverness, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1974), p., 70.

¹⁶Ibid, p., 75.

- (1) Because the Scripture says, God blinds their eyes and hardens their heads even actively, and judicially... (2) Because, God is said to punish one sin, with another... (3) From the practice of Job, and David, who, when they were afflicted, and persecuted looked to God, and it patiently.

The third and last key question then comes to this:

Does the sinfulness of the action proceed only from the creature and not from God? I answer, from the creature only.... Well then, do not the Libertines err, who affirm, God (without blasphemy spoken) to be the author and cause of all sin? Yes.

To this, Dickson lists a number of reason why God is not the author of sin, such as that according to the testimony of David, of Paul, of Moses, that all of God's ways are just and upright. Also is to the highest degree holy, pure and spotless, and that he is absolutely perfect, therefore he cannot fail or be deficient in working. And because God is the judge of world. He is the forbiddor, the hater, and revenger of all sin, which is contrary to his holy nature. And lastly, because God is above all and under the command of no one.¹⁷

Here we see Dickson keen to ensure that God is no idle permitted, but that he is active. But his brief answer is to note how God is active in the production of sin. Yet he too fails to explain in better detail the mechanics of the relationship between divine foreordination and permission of sin.

A.A. Hodge is disappointing in his discussion of this question-problem. He is uncharacteristically brief here. He merely posits a number of assertions. He says this section of the Confession (5:4) "makes no attempt to explain the nature of those providential actions which are concerned with the origin of sin in the moral universe, and in the control of the sinful actions of his creatures."¹⁸ From this he lists off two main points, viz., that God not only permits sin, but controls and directs it; yet the sinfulness of the action proceeds only from the creature and not from God.

What has been seen so far is that many of the best Reformed theologians so far have not objected to the terminology of "permission." None, have posited Clark's objection. None have said that permission of sin, in regard to God is a meaningless or unintelligible concept.

Thomas Ridgeley is the last of our commentators to be surveyed here. Ridgeley represents the last of the Scholastic Protestants, of the late orthodoxy. His Commentary on the Larger Catechism expresses that distinctive scholastic favour, following all the standard terminology and loci subdivisions. Originally it was intended as a *Body of Divinity* not a mere commentary on the Larger Catechism. His comments cited now are from his discussion of Larger Catechism 18.

Firstly, Ridgeley wisely notes that herein is a great difficulty, wherein we must proceed with the utmost caution. For we must avoid making God the author of sin, nor make God's providence exclude sinful actions.¹⁹ He then lists off many verses wherein God is said to be the cause of many evils and sins committed by men.²⁰ He then says that these verses are to be explained in such a way that they are consistent the divine perfections, or that God is the author or approver of sin.

Ridgeley first resources to the doctrine of divine concurrence.²¹ He takes the classical approach that concurrence of sin pertains to the action of the event, not so much with the moral quality per se. He gives examples, one of which is

¹⁷David Dickson *Truths Victory Over Error*, (Edinburgh: Printed by John Reid, 1684), pp, 42-5. That last comment from Dickson smacks of God as *ex lex*.

¹⁸A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), p., 99.

¹⁹Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism*, (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993), Vol., 1, p., 358.

²⁰E.g., Ex 4:21, DT 2:30, 2 Sam 16:10, Gen 45:8, 1 Kings 22:23.

²¹This doctrine was controverted by some 19th C Presbyterian theologians, all for the wrong reasons and unwisely.

the example of the lame horse. The ride may spur the horse onwards, if it be lame, the defective motion proceeds solely from the horse, not the ride. The sun gives off heat which draws forth vapours from the earth, but the stench that may accompany a vapour comes not from the sun, but from the matter from which the vapour has been drawn.²² Thus, he argues, the providential concurrence of God can regard the natural action of a sinful event, but not properly or directly the cause of the moral quality of the event. Thus in the example of Joseph and his betrayal by his brothers and subsequent selling into slavery, or in the example of Shimei's cursing of David, the providence of God was conversant about the actions of sin, God is said to have sold Joseph, or of God's command to Shimei to curse David, even though the sin proceeds from the inherent depravity of the men themselves.²³

Ridgeley is then ready to note that God in causing these actions in no way seeks to ensnare or draw men into sin, "Objects are not presented by providence with a design to ensnare or draw men into sin."

There are other ends of their of their being presented; which may be illustrated by a particular instance. God knows, that if the gospel be preached, some will take occasion to reproach it. Yet he orders that it shall be preached, not that men may take occasion to reproach it, but that those who he has ordain to eternal life may be converted by it. So the saviour appeared publicly at the feast of the Passover, though he knew that the Jews would put him to death; yet the end of his going to Jerusalem was not that he might draw forth their corruption, but that he might finish the work which he came into the world to do. He was, at that time, engaged in his Father's work; but they performed that which they were prompted to do, by Satan, and by their own wicked hearts.²⁴

Now we come to Ridgeley's discussion of permission. For him, God does permit sin, but not passively or idly. He likens the matter to a waterway. If the banks of the waterway are broken, then given the nature of the waterway, it will spill over. In this way, God may remove obstacles, but man by the necessary propensity of his own sinful inclination carries him effectively into sin. Almost as if Ridgeley had read an argument just like the one Clark adduces, Ridgeley points out that in regard to men, we are obligated to do all that we can to prevent evil. But with God, he is not so obligated. God is not bound to extend restraining grace which would necessarily and effectively prevent sin.²⁵

In this manner, the example given by Clark is completely fallacious. The lifeguard is obligated by divine law to save the drowning boy. His reticent and inaction in no way annul him of this responsibility. But with God, this is not so. God is not obligated to save anyone. If what Clark says is true, then grace would no more be grace, but a duty. Indeed, ironically, Clark has embraced the very Arminian categories of fairness and justice that he would normally reject.

Ridgeley thus notes that often in the case of evil and suffering, God uses second causes, which act freely according to their own natures. And in this use of second causes, so bounded, so hedged in and banked by his providence, God may have an alternate end, to that of the second causal agent. God may use an occasion of sin to bring about a wise and glorious end of his own, even though the agent of the sinful action had his or her own sinful ends. God brings good out of evil.²⁶

²²Ibid, p., 359.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid, p., 360. Though what he says here is perfectly true, one must note that there is a sense where God's dealings with mankind have a twofold end. The gospel for example, has the end of saving the elect, and yet increasing the condemnation of the non-elect *upon the supposition of their rejection of it*. This point is often neglected by Calvinists of both wings, hyper and non-hyper. Hypercalvinists tend to stress the straightforwardness of the second end, that is, in a symmetrical simplicity, the latter end is straightforwardly to increase of culpability of the reprobate. Hypercalvinists tend to fail to see primary and secondary ends, or primary and subordinate ands of the gospel offer. One the other hand, some orthodox calvinists will only stress the former end, the salvation of the elect.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid, p., 361.

Discoursing on LC 19, Ridgeley expands some these ideas here. He notes the instance of Job. In the example of Job, God bounded and ordered and so governed the actions of Satan, nevertheless it is also true that God permitted²⁷ Satan to pour out his evils upon Job. In this example, Ridgeley tell us, Divine ordination of sin works in a most compatible manner with his permission of sin. God so limits and constrains Satan, that he cannot act apart from God's will, yet Satan acts freely and spontaneously, yet also necessarily, according to this sinful propensions of his own evil nature.²⁸

This point also invalidates Clark's second objection that permission entails, necessarily, a force or power which is independent of God's sovereignty, which is outside of God's control. As Ridgeley argues, there is no thing which can act or think independently of God's control of everything. Nothing escapes the purview of God's providence, and yet at no point is God the author of sin, at no point does God work in a straightline manner to cause sin.

Ridgeley's discussion, while brief, when compared to comparable discussions of this topic in the great systematic works of Calvin, Ursinus, Turretin, a' Brakel, or Heppe, it does contain all the essential elements and arguments that they contain.

Lastly, I will now briefly discuss Calvin's view on this. I choose to discuss him because many today openly misread his intent. At no point did Calvin ever intend to deny permission of sin, only the idea that God idly permits sin, or unwillingly permits sin, or that divine permission is opposed or apart from the will of God.

Calvin in his *Institutes* speaks to this of God's permission of sin: 1.14.17; 1.16.8; 1.17.8, 1.18.1-2; 2.4.1-5; 3.23.7-8. In section 1.14.17, Calvin notes that Satan is under the command of God, and compelled. But for Calvin this does not mean that Satan is internally impelled or infused with a will to sin. Calvin is clear:

Therefore Satan is clearly under God's power, and is so ruled by his bidding as to be compelled to render him service. Indeed, when we say that Satan resists God, and that Satan's works disagree with Gods works, we at the same time assert that this resistance and this opposition are dependent upon God's sufferance. I am not now speaking of Satan's will, nor even of his effort, but only of his effect. For inasmuch as the devil is by nature wicked, he is not at all inclined to obedience to the divine will, but utterly intent upon contumacy and rebellion. From himself and his own wickedness, therefore, arises his passionate and deliberate opposition to God. By this wickedness he is urged on to attempt courses of action which he believes to be most hostile to God. But because with the bridle of his power God holds him bound and restrained, he carries out only those things which have been divinely permitted to him; and so he obeys his Creator, whether he will or not, because he is compelled to yield him service wherever God impels him.

Calvin in the wider context here speaks of Satan doing nothing unless commanded by God, but he means in the sense of negative commands, not in the sense of directly and positively commanding Satan to cause to sin or to cause a man to man to sin. In 1.18.1-2, Calvin rightly rails against a bare permission apart from the will of God. He speaks of God's secret mode of causing sin to come to pass. In 2.4.1-5, Calvin again attacks the idea of a bare permission, or recourse to bare foreknowledge. Calvin never ceases to use the word *permission* even when he is allegedly denying it.

Here they have recourse to the distinction between will and permission. By this they would maintain that the wicked perish because God permits it, not because he so wills. But why shall we say "permission" unless it is because God so wills? Still, it is not in itself likely that man brought destruction upon himself through himself, by God's mere permission and without any ordaining. As if God did not establish the condition in which he wills the chief of his creatures to be! I shall not hesitate, then, simply to confess with Augustine that "the will of God is the necessity of things," and that what he has willed will of necessity come to pass, as those things which he has foreseen will truly come to pass. Now if either the Pelagians, or Manichees, or Anabaptists, or Epicureans (for on this issue we have to deal with these four sects) in excuse for themselves and for the wicked, raise by way of objection the necessity by which they are constrained because of divine predestination, they

²⁷Ridgeley uses the archaic word for permission: *suffers*.

²⁸Ibid, p., 366.

advance no argument applicable to the cause. For if predestination is nothing but the meting out of divine justice—secret, indeed, but blameless—because it is certain that they were not unworthy to be predestined to this condition, it is equally certain that the destruction they undergo by predestination is also most just. Besides, their perdition depends upon the predestination of God in such a way that the cause and occasion of it are found in themselves. For the first man fell because the Lord had judged it to be expedient; why he so judged is hidden from us. Yet it is certain that he so judged because he saw that thereby the glory of his name is duly revealed. Where you hear God’s glory mentioned, think of his justice. For whatever deserves praise must be just. Accordingly, man falls according as God’s providence ordains, but he falls by his own fault. A little before, the Lord had declared that “everything that he had made... was exceedingly good” [Genesis 1:31]. Whence, then, comes that wickedness to man, that he should fall away from his God? Lest we should think it comes from creation, God had put his stamp of approval on what had come forth from himself. By his own evil intention, then, man corrupted the pure nature he had received from the Lord; and by his fall he drew all his posterity with him into destruction. Accordingly, we should contemplate the evident cause of condemnation in the corrupt nature of humanity—which is closer to us—rather than seek a hidden and utterly incomprehensible cause in God’s predestination. And let us not be ashamed to submit our understanding to God’s boundless wisdom so far as to yield before its many secrets. For, of those things which it is neither given nor lawful to know, ignorance is learned; the craving to know, a kind of madness. [3.23.8]²⁹

Time and again, Calvin attacks the idea of an unwilling permission. All the time while he allegedly rails against permission *per se*, he continues to use the term. Surely we are not to think Calvin merely an inconsistent theologian, who is just using the word as a semantic convenience?

In his work on Providence, he explicitly says: “At the same time, I do acknowledge this as my doctrine, that not merely by the permission of God, but by his secret counsel also, Adam fell, and in his fall, dragged down all his descendants into everlasting perdition.”³⁰ In his work on the Eternal Predestination of God, Calvin categorically rejects the idea that he has ever asserted that God by a direct work of the Spirit, caused the fall. If that were so, he argues, then Pighius’ charges against him would be justified. He further says it is to slander him to say that he makes the fall of man a work of God.³¹ Speaking of the fall, Calvin says very clearly states: “in a wonderful and ineffable way, what was done contrary to his will was not yet done without his will, because it would not have been done at all unless He had allowed it. So he permitted it not unwillingly but willingly.”³²

To conclude then, we can discern a number of truths that are exhibited in the WCF and which are brought out to varying degrees of clarity in the orthodox commentaries on the Westminster confessional documents. We can see that God does permit sin. But this permission is in conjunction with God’s wise bounding, ordering, directing and governing of sin according to his holy will. Yet notwithstanding that wise providential governing of sin, God in no way is the author of sin, or the approver of it. It has been seen that in no way is sin an independent force operating in the world, if it is supposed sin is permitted by God, as Clark alleged. For sinful actions are so controlled by God at every point that no thing operates independently of his power and sovereignty. It has also been seen that Clark’s objections against permission are themselves fallacious.

While this is a complex matrix of ideas, it can be seen what is not the case. It is not the case that God authors sin. And it is not the case that God does not permit sin. We know, too, something of the mechanics of the divine causation of sin. It entails an indirect operation, whereby the restraints to sinful actions are so established or removed that sinful natures, given their necessary propensities to sin, will necessarily sin. In this way, there is a real substantive sense where God’s ordination of sin, via an indirect operation can and does secure necessary results. In regard to post-fallen man,

²⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

³⁰John Calvin, *The Secret Providence of God*, trans., by James Lillie, (Albany, OR: Ages Digital Library, 1998), pp., 17-18.

³¹John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans., by J.K.S. Reid, (London: James Clark & Co., Limited, 1961), p., 122-26.

³²Ibid, p., 123.

specifically, divine necessity is secured by and through the free agency of second causes. Thus the confession is both thoroughly biblical and also logical.

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