

The Omniscience of God:
Biblical Doctrine and Answers to Objections

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Introduction

"A saying of Chrysostom's," wrote John Calvin, "has always pleased me very much, that the foundation of our philosophy is humility.¹ But that of Augustine pleases me even more: `When a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule in eloquence, he replied, "Delivery"; what was the second rule, "Delivery"; what was the third rule, "Delivery"; so if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, "Humility."'"²

It is not by accident that the first of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount was "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Poverty of spirit-humility-is the *sine qua non* of the Christian life, the indispensable first step of faith. Without it, there is no repentance, there is no teachableness, there is no awe or wonder or praise of the glory and greatness and majesty of God. It is also not by accident that humility stands at the height of the Christian life, at the pinnacle of awareness of God. Or it is, so to speak, the well from which springs the fountain of doxology: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! `For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?' 'Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?' For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:33-36).

It is a tragic fact, a fact that fills me with sadness-a fact that almost makes me despair in sheer amazement-that anyone, anyone who calls himself a Christian, who names Christ as Lord, who professes fidelity to the Holy Scriptures, who claims to be a child of God and to worship the sovereign LORD of the universe, should deny to that LORD the perfection of infinite knowledge. And why? Because he cannot Humbly admit his own creatureliness and the devastation brought on him by sin-the sin he inherited from his father Adam just as surely as he inherited the nobility of bearing the image of God as a free agent, a nobility he is quick and jealous to defend, at the same time that he repudiates the corruption he is quick and jealous to deny.

¹ Chrysostom, *De profectu evangelii* 2 (MPG 51. 312).

² John Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.11; citing Augustine, *Letters cxiii*. 3. 22 (MPL 33. 442).

The testimony of the Church through the ages, grounded in Scripture, is so united, so strong, and so fervent on the infinity, the perfection, and the immutability of God in all His attributes, including His absolute omniscience, including His complete foreknowledge of all things, that it is astounding, even irritating, that some professing Christians should dispute it. Why this battle even needs to be fought today escapes me, until I remember that every generation of Christians, in grappling with the spirit of its own age-that spirit of the world that is ever changing yet ever the same-every generation of believers must make the great creeds its own, must discover anew for itself the depth of their wisdom and their fidelity to Scripture.

The spirit of our age, Francis Schaeffer warns in *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, is "the idea of 'freedom'-not just freedom as an abstract ideal, or in the sense of being free from injustice, but *freedom in an absolute sense . . .*" It is "autonomous Man setting himself up as God, in defiance of the knowledge and the moral and spiritual truth which God has given."³ Slightly over a century ago, it required the atheist William Ernest Henley, in the poem *Invictus*-"Unconquered"-to pen the words, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul."⁴ Today those lines could be the rallying cry of a growing and insidious movement among professing Christians, a movement variously called "Moral Government Theology" and sometimes-wrongly, as we shall see-equated with classical Arminianism, that, to assert the autonomy of man, blasphemously denies the perfection of God.

But these people are no more the masters of their fate than was Henley. When he penned the famous poem, Henley lay in a hospital bed on the verge of death, having lost one leg to infection and in danger of losing the other, depending for his very survival on the loving and brilliant care of the Christian doctor Joseph Lister, whose advances in antiseptic medicine--founded on the discoveries of another Christian doctor, Louis Pasteur--saved his leg and his life.

Just so it is only by the patient, providential grace of God that those who deny His perfections live from day to day. While they vainly declare the absolute freedom of their wills as the boundary of His knowledge, it remains true from moment to moment that it is in Him, and in Him alone, that they live and move and have their being, "since He gives to all life, breath, and *all things*" (*Acts 17:28, 25*)-all things including even the "free wills" by which they so futilely declare their own autonomy, demonstrating that to be unconquered by God is merely to be not yet surrendered to Him.

Unwilling to admit the bondage of their own wills to their corrupt nature-which they also disavow-they insist, "The power to the contrary is essential to free agency"-A free moral agent may always act contrary to any influence, not destructive to his freedom, that may be brought to bear upon him."⁵ For them, "Voluntary responsible action involves the possibility of non-compliance or of contrary choice-the freedom of uncertainty. Virtuous action must be voluntary action. If no contrary choice, then no virtuous choice . . ."⁶ And just as surely as they are unwilling to admit the bondage of their wills to their corrupt nature, they also are unwilling to admit the certainty of their choices in the foreknowledge of God, all because of their devotion to "freedom," by which they really mean nothing short of *autonomy*, the absolute independence of the moral agent from any limiting factor. In the words of their chief systematizer, Gordon Olson, the "future choices of moral beings, when acting freely in their moral agency, have not been brought into existence as yet and thus are not fixities or objects of possible knowledge." Indeed, "This applies to actions of the Godhead as well as to the self-caused actions of men."⁷

Their stubborn commitment to the fantasy of "the power of contrary choice" leads them, then, to deny not only God's foreknowledge of *their* acts but even of His acts-in outright contradiction of His own self-revelation:

³ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), 20, 22.

⁴ William Ernest Henley, *Invictus* ("Unconquered").

⁵ Gordon C. Olson, *Sharing Your Faith: The 3 M's of Witnessing-The Messenger, the Message, the Method*, 4th rev. ed. (Chicago: Bible Research Fellowship, 1976), W-Me-IV-7.

⁶ Gordon C. Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (Franklin Park, IL: Bible Research Fellowship, 1980), T-V-1. (*The Truth Shall Make You Free* is largely a rewrite of *Sharing Your Faith*.)

⁷ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-13.

Remember this, and show yourselves men; Recall to mind, O you transgressors. Remember the former things of old, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, "My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure."
 Calling a bird of prey from the east,
 The man who executes My counsel, from a far country.
 Indeed I have spoken it;
 I will also bring it to pass. I
 have purposed it;
 I will also do it.

[Isaiah 46:8-11]

Can this god they worship be the God who "predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved," who "works *all things* according to the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:5-6, 11)?

But just as they do not stop at denying to God perfect foreknowledge of the free choices of men, but insist on denying to Him the foreknowledge of His own free choices, so also they do not hesitate to descend to the depths of blasphemy by fastening on Him the same definition of freedom they clutch to themselves, namely, "the power of contrary choice."⁸ On the supposition that "Our analysis of our own abilities of personality . . . will aid greatly in understanding the nature of the great Divine Personalities,"⁹ and having determined that our freedom consists in "the power of contrary choice," that "Personalities have the mysterious ability to originate action and are not controlled by some causation acting upon the will"¹⁰-not even some causation internal to the willing agent, as we shall see-they infer that the members of the blessed Trinity "have the mysterious ability of voluntary moral choice, or self-direction. They have chosen to use Their immeasurable energies in a constructive or benevolent manner, the results being called `the wisdom of God.'"¹¹ Just as, for man, "Holiness and sin are free voluntary acts of will or states of mind, and, although strongly influenced, *are not caused by any internal force of nature*, tendency, or instinct, nor by persuasion from external sources,"¹² so also for God, "Moral attributes involve the element of choice, or have a voluntary causation to them. They are not natural attributes in that they are not endowments of God's existence, but are moral in the sense that they are the result of a disposition of will. They exist *because each Member of the Godhead perpetually chooses that they should be so*. Moral character must be an active something. It cannot be a static fixity of some sort back of the will, causing its actions."¹³ And so they reason from what man has become by the Fall to what God is, rather than from what God is to what man was meant to be. They create God in their own image, in direct contempt of God's warning, "To whom will you liken Me, and make Me equal and compare Me, that we should be alike?" (Isaiah 46:5).

I digress somewhat here from the focus of this paper not by accident but with a purpose: to demonstrate the tremendous stakes involved in accepting the primary principle of the opponents of God's perfect and complete foreknowledge. The starting point of their whole philosophy is their belief that free moral agency necessarily

⁸ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-22.

⁹ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-8. (The unusual application to God of the word *personalities* [rather than the orthodox *persons*] appears to be more than a simple idiosyncrasy with Olson, who, like many Pelagians before him, faltered at the doctrine of the Trinity, calling God "a trinity of personal spiritual beings [sic]" whose oneness was "of purpose and activity" [T-III-1], explaining "that the oneness that exists among the Members of the Godhead is a moral or voluntary oneness of character and relationship" [T-III-3].)

¹⁰ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-8.

¹¹ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-9.

¹² Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-V-1, emphasis added.

¹³ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-23, emphasis added.

involves "the power of contrary choice."¹⁴ From this follows their insistence that what is freely chosen cannot be certain but must be absolutely contingent-caused neither by any internal fixity of nature (and hence they deny original sin and moral inability¹⁵-two other central and classical doctrines of orthodox Christianity) nor by any external compulsion or necessity; and if it cannot be certain, it cannot be foreknown. From this also follows their insistence that if God is a free moral agent, His free choices too cannot be certain but must be absolutely contingent; and if not certain, then not foreknown. And from this it necessarily follows that God's future moral character is neither certain nor foreknown but contingent; i.e., that God's continued goodness is not guaranteed. And so along with God's intellectual perfection and immutability, we must deny also His moral perfection and immutability. To put it simply, we have no ground whatever for assurance that God will not decide tomorrow to become the devil.

That this is the logical and unavoidable implication of their philosophy is clear. No doubt they disavow this implication with all sincerity-or at least that some of them do. But sincerity, good and commendable as it is, can never substitute for sound thinking in testing all things, holding fast to that which is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

They might, to substantiate their denial, point to a curious passage in Olson's writings, in which he appears to put an internal limit on God's free agency (an "internal force of nature," he might have called it, did he not explicitly deny that "free voluntary acts of will or states of mind" could be "caused by any internal force of nature"¹⁶): "God's nature and moral character imposes limitations. God is able to do whatever He wills (except with moral beings [sic!]), but His will is limited to doing those things which are in harmony with His wise and holy and perfect character. God cannot do things contrary to Himself. This is not a defect in Divine omnipotence but a perfection of the Divine Being."¹⁷

But we find no consolation here, no assurance that God will continue good tomorrow. For God's character, says Olson, like all moral character, "must be an active something. It cannot be a static fixity of some sort back of the will, causing its actions. Moral character is dynamic; it is the whole personality in action; it is what we are doing with our endowments or abilities of personality and the moral understanding which we possess."¹⁸ God's character, in other words, is determined moment by moment by God's choices; it is "the result of a disposition of will" and because "each Member of the Godhead perpetually chooses that [it] should be so."¹⁹ If it is true that Olson believes that God's "will is limited to doing those things which are in harmony with His wise and holy and

¹⁴ See the extensive and carefully discriminating discussion of this in Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, 3 vols.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1871-1873] 1973 rpt.), 2:278-309.

¹⁵ Olson insists that man has "ability of intellect," "ability of emotion," and "ability of free -will or self-determination" (*The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-IV-2*); that "Holiness and sin are free voluntary acts of will or states of mind, and, although strongly influenced, are not caused by any internal force of nature, tendency, or instinct" (*The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-V-1*); that "Sin is not . . . an abstract thing which invades and lodges somewhere in our personalities, but is rather an orderly sequence of wrong choices and conduct" (*The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-V-3*); that "Depravity strongly influences, but does not compel, toward wrong action. We choose to follow our inclinations when we sin" (*The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-VI-5*); that "Moral depravity . . . is always a voluntary development which results from the wrong choices of our wills" (*The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-VI-6*); that "Moral depravity . . . is always a voluntary development . . . The universality of sin in the world is not to be accounted for, therefore, by some fixed causation in our personality inherited by birth" (*Sharing Your Faith, W-Me-IV-4-5*); that "So-called inability is a question of will not' rather than 'cannot' obey God's reasonable requirements" (*Sharing Your Faith, p. W-Me-VIII-6*). (Other proponents of Moral Government Theology similarly deny original sin and human inability. See George Otis Jr., *The God They Never Knew* [Van Nuys, CA: Bible Voice, 1978], 63, 59; Winkie Pratney, *Youth Af lame!* [Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1983], 83, 93, 76, 94, 93; Theodore W. Elliott, *Born Sinful? Original Sin* [Springfield, IL: One Way Fellowship, n.d.], *passim*.) Since Olson explicitly denies that man inherits sin or guilt from Adam (i.e., he denies the doctrine of original sin-the imputation of Adam's sin and guilt to his posterity), it should come as no surprise that he also denies the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers, finding the cause of salvation not in Christ's atoning death but in the believer's self-reformation: "Romans 5:12-19 does not establish the dogma of the literal imputation of Adam's sin to all his posterity, but merely affirms in a parallelism that just as Adam's sin was the occasion, not cause, of the voluntary disobedience of all men, so Christ is the occasion, not cause, of the salvation offered to all men" (*The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-VI-8*). Hence it is clear that by starting with the definition of freedom as the "power of contrary choice" he is forced ultimately to deny nearly the whole defining body of Christian faith: original sin, fallen man's moral inability, the imputation of Christ's righteousness in justification (parallel to the imputation of Adam's sin in condemnation), and the moral and intellectual infinity, perfection, and immutability of God. But pursuing *all* of these elements of Olson's system would take us too far a field from the topic of this essay.

¹⁶ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-V-1*.

¹⁷ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-III-22*.

¹⁸ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-III-23*.

¹⁹ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-III-23*.

perfect character,"²⁰ it is also true that Olson believes that God's character "cannot be a static fixity of some sort back of the will, causing its actions" but "is the whole personality in action; it is what [God is] doing with [His] endowments or abilities of personality and the moral understanding which [He] possess[es]."²¹ "Moral attributes," Olson insists, "involve the element of choice, or have a voluntary causation to them. They are not natural attributes in that they are not endowments of God's existence, but are moral in the sense that they are the result of a disposition of will. They exist because each Member of the Godhead perpetually chooses that they should be so."²²

So while God's "will is limited to doing those things which are in harmony with His wise and holy and perfect character," this can only be so as long as His character remains wise and holy and perfect, and nothing can guarantee that it will do so forever, for character by definition "cannot be a static fixity," must "involve the element of choice, or have a voluntary causation" to it, must-in short, be "the result of a disposition of will." As Olson puts it, "The will determines the nature or character, rather than the nature the will."²³ Should it ever occur that God chooses to make His character other than wise and holy and perfect-and no "internal force of nature" can prevent His doing so-then of course that wise and holy and perfect character will no longer limit what He wills.²⁴

The god of Moral Government Theology is a sorry substitute for the God of Scripture-the God infinite, eternal, and immutable in His being, wisdom, power, justice, holiness, goodness, and truth, as the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* puts it. The god of Moral Government Theology is neither infinite nor eternal nor immutable in his wisdom nor infinite, eternal, or immutable in his justice, holiness, goodness, and truth. Dare we hope that one attribute is left to him-his power? No. That, too, bows before the awesome freedom of man. Olson hinted at it in a parenthetical phrase in his statement of the limits on his god's will, cited above: "God is able to do whatever He wills (*except with moral beings*), but His will is limited to doing those things which are in harmony with His wise and holy and perfect character."²⁵ He makes it explicit when he writes, "Man as an endowed moral being has been given the ability to *limit the omnipotence of God* in his sphere of life. Mankind by their rebellion against God and their obstinacy in refusing the mercy and forgiveness through the atoning death of Christ have imposed very great limitations upon God's will and happiness God in creating moral creatures with *the power of contrary choice* made this a possibility."²⁶

So there you have it: (1) the god of Moral Government Theology: finite and imperfect and changeable in his power, wisdom, justice, holiness, goodness, and truth; (2) the man of Moral Government Theology: perfectly free and able to limit God's power, will, and knowledge. And from these necessarily flows (3) the gospel of Moral Government Theology: that "the atoning death of Christ," as Olson deigns to call it nay, even Christ Himself-"is the occasion, not cause, of the salvation offered to all men."²⁷ The "consequences of right and wrong moral action" in Moral Government Theology ". . . are based *solely upon personal merit or demerit* as known only to God" and "are and will be in exact accord or in proportion to merit and demerit."²⁸

It is, as I have said, tragic and heartbreaking that the doctrine of God's omniscience should need defense not against self-avowed pagans but against those who profess the Christian faith, for (1) it is the doctrine of Scripture, the rule of the Christian faith; (2) it is the doctrine of the Church through the ages, a trustworthy guide to the meaning of Scripture, a guide from which one should depart only for the most compelling reasons-namely,

²⁰ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-22.

²¹ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-23.

²² Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-23.

²³ Gordon C. Olson, *Holiness and Sin* (Minneapolis: Men for Missions, 1971), 24.

²⁴ The inherent inconsistency in Olson's system is evident here. On one page he makes the will dependent on the character; on the next page he makes the character dependent on the will. Such elementary deficiencies in logic and analysis are abundant in Olson's writings.

²⁵ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-22, emphasis added.

²⁶ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-22, emphases added.

²⁷ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-VI-8. Compare Elliott, *Born Sinful? 16*: "All that [Romans 5:12-19] is showing is that Adam was the occasion of sin and Jesus is the occasion of salvation. Without a being with the ability to choose between holiness and sin, there could be no virtue or blame in that being. He would be under the law of cause and effect. The ability to choose holiness or sin was the occasion or opportunity for sin to enter the world, through Adam Christ is also the occasion of salvation. Without Him, salvation is impossible. He is the opportunity or circumstance where by [sic] man can be saved. This is not to say that all are saved because of Him, just as all are not lost because of Adam, only that the opportunity is present."

²⁸ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-IV-10.11.

an insuperable argument from Scripture, which the opponents of omniscience have never provided; and (3) opposition to it arises chiefly from sinful pride, while the first of the virtues – on which hang all others, including the understanding of Scripture – is humility.

First, second, third, and always, humility. That is Augustine's answer to the siren song of freedom falsely so called. Humility! Humility! Humility!

Let us see, then, the omniscience of the true God of Scripture, and learn the lesson Job learnt: "I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.' I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:2-4).

God's Omniscience is Revealed in Scripture

The omniscience of God is revealed in Scripture in a variety of ways, from explicit statements to implicit assumptions to propositions whose logical implications are unavoidable.

God Knows All Things. Explicitly stated, "God . . . knows all things" (1 John 3:20). Not just some things; not all things *except* those things that "have not been brought into existence as yet and thus are not fixities or objects of possible knowledge"-Olson's description of the future choices of free moral agents acting in their moral agency.²⁹ **God knows all things.**³⁰

Notice the absurdity of Olson's stated reason for excluding from things knowable the future choices of free moral agents. Why are they not "objects of possible knowledge"? Because they "have not been brought into existence as yet." This of course cuts too broad a swath through God's foreknowledge even for Olson. Consider. Through Joseph, God foretold seven years of plenty and seven years of famine for Egypt (Genesis 41:26-27, 29-30). Yet the years of feast and famine had "not been brought into existence as yet" and thus-if we are to accept Olson's logic-"were not fixities or objects of possible knowledge." Was God merely guessing, then, that they *might* occur? Did He exercise some superhuman facility in meteorological analysis that afforded an exceptionally high degree of reliability to His prediction-so long as it stopped short of true knowledge? If it is truly just the fact that the feast and famine were "not brought into existence as yet" that made them not "objects of possible knowledge," then this conclusion is inescapable.

It might, however, be replied, "But the years of feast and famine were not the result of the free choices of free moral agents acting freely in their moral agency. Look! The text itself says, 'God has shown Pharaoh what *He* [God] is about to do,' and ' . . . the dream was repeated to Pharaoh twice because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass' (Genesis 41:28, 32)." Very well. But the years of feast and famine did not yet exist. If, then, God foreknew them-truly foreknew them, so that they were certain-then non-existence does not disqualify something as an object of possible knowledge for God.

"But God foreknew the coming years of feast and famine precisely because He had predetermined that they would come to pass. That is what made them certain." I will not argue with the truth of the claim; it is only what the Scriptures everywhere declare and what the Church in all ages has taught. But I must point out that it is in stark contradiction to this philosophy's own view of free moral agency and of God Himself. For according to Olson, "free voluntary acts of will or states of mind . . . are *not caused by any internal force of nature.*"³¹ In short, no choice of any free moral agent at one time can *force* that agent to make some particular choice at a later time. If God is a free moral agent, then His choice at one time to send the years of feast and famine must have been free, "not caused by any internal force of nature." But if He is a free moral agent, then His choice at a later time to fulfill His earlier choice to send the years of feast and famine must have been free, "not caused by any

²⁹ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-13.

³⁰ "It might be objected, "If God knows all things, then does God know things that are false? Does He know that $2 + 2 = 5$?" The objection fails to recognize that knowing is always true. What God knows, God knows truly. (And, because God is perfect, what God thinks, God also thinks truly. But while man knows only truly, he may think falsely-and even think he knows what he falsely thinks, while in fact he does not know it.) Therefore, since it is not true that $2 + 2 = 5$, God cannot know that $2 + 2 = 5$; but since it is false that $2 + 2 = 5$, God knows (truly) that it is false that $2 + 2 = 5$.

³¹ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-V-I, emphasis added.

internal force of nature." His earlier choice-which prompted the prophetic dreams and their interpretation-cannot have compelled His later choice to fulfill the prophecy in history.

"But God's first choice-to give the prophecy--defined His will and character in a particular way, to which His later choice was bound to comply." The response will not suffice. For according to Olson, "Voluntary responsible action involves the possibility of non-compliance of contrary choice-the freedom of uncertainty. Virtuous action must be voluntary action. If no contrary choice, then no virtuous choice" ³² Was God's choice to fulfill the prophecy voluntary? Then it cannot have been "caused by any internal force of nature" ³³ – including any hypothetical binding effect of His earlier free choice on His character. And indeed, we should know, on the grounds of Olson's philosophy, that God's earlier will-defined character could not bind His later choice, since "The will determines the nature or character, rather than the nature the will." ³⁴ Whatever definition His first choice gave to His character, His second choice remained completely undetermined; it remained to be seen, by observing that absolutely unconstrained second choice, whether His character would remain the same or change. For, after all, "Moral attributes [including faithfulness] involve the element of choice, or have a voluntary causation to them. They are not natural attributes in that they are not endowments of God's existence, but are moral in the sense that they are the result of a disposition of will. They exist because each Member of the Godhead perpetually chooses that they should be so." ³⁵ And if one or more of the Members of the Godhead stopped choosing that they should be so? Nothing-nothing-in the nature of God or free agency, according to this philosophy, provides any reason to believe they cannot or will not.

Was God's choice to fulfill the prophecy-that is, to keep His promise virtuous? Then He must have had, at the moment He made the second choice, the "power of contrary choice," for "If no contrary choice, then no virtuous choice." So long as this philosophy remains wedded to the notion of freedom as autonomy, as the "power of contrary choice," it must arrive at one of two conclusions. Either (1) God's promises do not bind Him regarding the future, and therefore we have no ground for assurance that He will keep them even those on which we rely absolutely for our own salvation; or (2) there is nothing virtuous or praiseworthy in God's keeping His promises, and we only pretend to worship when we sing, "Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed, Thy hand hath provided. Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!"

"Then perhaps it really was simply that God, with His perfect knowledge of the material world as it then existed, could extrapolate with perfect reliability from the weather at one point what would be the weather for the next fourteen years. Perhaps He really was merely predicting cause-and-effect physical relationships, something that even we can do, though to a lesser extent and with less accuracy and reliability." Aside from the fact that this expressly denies what the text says about the years of feast and famine-that God would "shortly bring [them] to pass" (Genesis 41:32; cf. v. 28), this, too, leaves us in an inextricable dilemma. If God's power was sufficient to change the cause-and-effect course of nature so as to make the prediction false, then the truth of the prediction hung always and only on whether God would choose to use His power that way; and as we have seen, nothing about that choice could have been determined by any internal force, such as God's prior self-defining decisions. In that case, God really did not foreknow the coming of the feast and famine. But if God's power was not sufficient to change the cause-and-effect course of nature so as to make the prediction false, then we have abandoned all pretense at believe in an omnipotent God, and we are talking instead about a god no greater than the gods of Olympus-lesser, even, for at least they could interfere in the weather! Thus the god of Moral Government Theology finds his omnipotence limited not only by the "free will" of man the moral agent, but also by the material cause-and-effect relationships of creation. Not sovereignty alone but providence also disappears.

³² Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-V-1.

³³ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-V-1.

³⁴ Gordon C. Olson, *Holiness and Sin* (Minneapolis: Men for Missions, 1971), 24.

³⁵ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*. T-111-23.

No, the truth of the matter is simply what Scripture says: "God . . . knows all things" (1 John 3:20)-including things not brought into existence as yet, whose present non-existence does not exclude them from the category of "objects of possible knowledge." The God who "calls those things which do not exist as though they did" (Romans 4:17) "knows all things."

Nothing Can Be Hid from God. The corollary of "God knows all things" is that nothing is or can be hidden from God. This is precisely what we are taught by Scripture. "If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall fall on me,' even the night shall be light about me; indeed the darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You" (Psalm 139:11-12). ". . . there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13). It is tempting to respond, "Yes, all things are naked and open to God. But things that do not yet exist are not among 'all things.'" But that is merely to attach to the infinite and eternal God limitations that properly apply only to finite and temporal creatures. It is to ignore the testimony of Romans 4:17, just cited: God "calls those things which do not exist as though they did." In knowing all things, God knows things presently existing as things presently (in relation to temporal things) existing, and things not yet existing as things not yet (in relation to temporal things) existing; but He knows them both with equal certitude, they are equally certain in His sight.³⁶

God's Understanding is Infinite. To say that God knows all things and that nothing can be hid from God is equivalent to saying that God's knowledge is limitless, unbounded. And that is precisely what Scripture says of it: "Great is our Lord, and mighty in power; His understanding is infinite" (Psalm 147:5). What is infinite is endless, unbounded, without limits. And what is infinite cannot grow, for if it did it would be greater after its growth than before, which would prove that it was not infinite before.

If God's understanding is infinite, then His foreknowledge must be absolute and complete, i.e., there must be nothing about the future that He does not know, for if there were, then when it became an accomplished fact, He would know it, and His knowledge would grow-i.e., His understanding would not have been infinite in the first place. Thus, if the "future choices of moral beings, when acting freely in their moral agency, have not been brought into existence as yet and thus are not fixities or objects of possible knowledge,"³⁷ then God's understanding is not infinite, and the Scripture is wrong. May it never be!

God's Knowledge Can Never Increase. Because God's understanding is infinite, His knowledge can never increase: "Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, Or as His counselor has taught Him? With whom did He take counsel, and who instructed Him, And taught Him in the path of justice? Who taught Him knowledge, And showed Him the way of understanding?" (Isaiah 40:13-14); "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?" (Romans 11:34). If God were to learn something new every time a moral agent made a free choice, then every moral agent would have "taught Him knowledge, and showed Him the way of understanding," every man would have "become His counselor."

God's Knowledge is Absolutely Comprehensive. This is simply the same as saying that God knows all things. But Scripture teaches us this in various ways and in relation to various categories of things to be known.

1. God's knowledge is comprehensive in space. The "eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth" (2 Chronicles 16:9). Does this imply that He learns new things as He searches about? That would contradict what we have already seen of His infinite knowledge and of His never learning anything new. No, the point of the metaphor-and metaphor it must be, since God does not have literal eyes with feet on which they run to and fro throughout the whole earth-the point must be that nowhere in all creation escapes His constant observation. His omnipresence makes the comprehensivity of His knowledge in relation to space inescapable, as the psalmist discovered: "O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the

³⁶ To say this is not to suggest that God is time bound. Present and future apply only to temporal beings, not to the eternal God. When we say that God knows "things future as things future," we mean that He knows things that are, in relation to temporal things, future, as things that are, in relation to temporal beings, future. But in relation to Himself, all things that are, in relation to temporal beings, past, present, and future are equally known without reference to any temporality attaching to Himself, which is why He calls "those things which do not exist as though they did."

³⁷ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-III-13.*

morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me" (Psalm 139:1-2, 6-10).

2. God's knowledge is comprehensive in time. "My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And *in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them*" (Psalm 139:15-16). God's absolute and unerring knowledge of the future sets Him apart absolutely from all temporally finite things, so that He can challenge the idols and those who worship them by comparing their ignorance of the future with His knowledge of it. "Present your case,' says the LORD. 'Bring forth your strong reasons,' says the King of Jacob. 'Let them bring forth and show us what will happen; let them show the former things what they were, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare to us things to come. Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods Indeed you are nothing, and your work is nothing; he who chooses you is an abomination.'" But not so God: "'I have raised up one from the north, and he shall come; from the rising of the sun he shall call on My name; and he shall come against princes as though mortar, as the potter treads clay. Who has declared from the beginning, that we may know? And former times, that we may say, "He is righteous"?"' (Isaiah 41:21-23a, 25-26).

Jesus made His ability to predict the future with absolute certainty an evidence of His deity when He said, "Now I tell you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am" (John 13:19).³⁸ Christ's foreknowledge of the one who would betray Him would not be evidence of His deity if it did not differ qualitatively from man's predictive abilities; not a mere probability-as might be attributed to shrewd psychological insight-but a certainty of prediction is in mind here. Indeed, Christ could not even have foreknown that Judas would betray Him, on the supposition that freedom always presupposes the power of contrary choice. If the choices of free moral agents are not limited by any internal causal factor such as character, as Moral Government Theology teaches, then Judas's choice could not have been foreknown merely on the basis of his character, since "The will determines the nature or character, rather than the nature the will."³⁹

Olson's inconsistency is clear when he seeks to preserve Judas's free agency in betraying Christ despite Christ's foreknowledge of it by writing, "It does not appear that the treachery of Judas was specifically prophesied in the Old Testament, nor that the Lord Jesus expected his apostasy *until He perceived its development in his mind*. If our Lord expected it all the time, why was He 'troubled in spirit' or heart-stricken at its development (Jn. 13:21)? It is obviously presented as a tragic surprise."⁴⁰ If free agency presupposes the power of contrary choice, and if "The will determines the character or nature rather than the nature the will," then right up to the moment when Judas's betrayal passed from a future contingency to a past event Judas could always have chosen otherwise.

The very principle on which Olson bases his denial of God's foreknowledge of the free choices of moral agents-the power of contrary choice-destroys his own explanation of how Judas's betrayal could be both free and foreknown. But not only Judas's choice. Much more is at stake. Olson writes, "Many future choices, actions, and mass reactions of men appear to be known to God beforehand and form the basis for many detailed plans of events that God purposes to bring to pass in making reconciliation for all men possible in His government of world affairs."⁴¹ Among these are "The rejection and putting to death of Christ, the Messiah and Savior, whom God purposed to send into

³⁸ Note that the word *He* at the close of the verse is not in the Greek text. The final Greek clause, *ego eimi*, asserts Christ's eternal existence. Compare John 8:58; Exodus 3:14; Isaiah 43:10. Thus Christ presents His absolute foreknowledge of the one who would betray Him as evidence of His deity.

³⁹ Gordon C. Olson, *Holiness and Sin* (Minneapolis: Men for Missions, 1971), 24.

⁴⁰ (The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-III-20, emphasis added).

⁴¹ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-13.

the world because of sin." How could God foreknow this sinful-i.e., moral and therefore free and uncertain-choice in which all men joined? Olson explains:

The Lord Jesus would come as "the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12), as "a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners" (He. 7:26), into a world that "loved the darkness rather than the light" (Jn. 3:19), energized by and under the dominion of "the evil one" (Eph. 2:2; 1 Jn. 5:19), "the father of lies" (Jn. 8:44). The Savior's total witness "that its deeds are evil" (Jn. 7:7) would call for such a revolutionary change that God the Father expected a total rejection by the masses and made His plans accordingly.⁴²

Consider what Olson's absolute commitment to the "power of contrary choice" as the ground of all moral agency does to this argument. He says that Jesus came as "the light of the world," "a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners," apparently as if this indicated something about Jesus' moral character. But since "The will determines the character or nature rather than the nature the will," there was never any assurance that Jesus would remain so throughout His sojourn on earth-or even that He would remain so through all the millennia prior to His incarnation. He says that Jesus came into a world that "loved the darkness rather than the light," apparently as if this indicated something about the character of the world-and of the people who constituted it. But since "The will determines the character or nature rather than the nature the will," nothing could ensure beforehand that, long before God's plan to send a Savior was ever enacted, this world, including all the people in it, would not stop loving the darkness and start loving the light instead, making the Savior's visit unnecessary and giving God another opportunity to make "new decisions," to "change His mind when certain reactions took place." He says that the world lies "under the dominion of `the evil one.'" But if this means anything at all, then it means that somehow the "dominion of the evil one" determined the character and choices of the world that made the world's rejection of Christ inevitable. Yet it is precisely such a dominion over the choices of free moral agents, a dominion that makes "the power of contrary choice" empty, that Olson denies both to God and to the internal character of free moral agents themselves. Thus in Olson's system, the devil has the power to do what God cannot do: control the choices of free moral agents! He calls the devil "the evil one" and "the father of lies." But is the devil a moral agent? If so, then he, too, always has "the power of contrary choice," and so nothing could ensure that his dominion would not turn into "the dominion of the righteous one," in which case he would not have incited men to reject the Savior (the Savior they no longer needed, by the way). He writes that on the basis of His understanding of the character of this world-this world that loved darkness rather than light and was energized by and under the dominion of the evil one-the Father "expected a total rejection by the masses and made His plans accordingly." But if the devil is a free moral agent, and if people are free moral agents, and if the power of contrary choice is essential to free moral agency, then there was no ground for the Father to expect their total rejection of the Messiah, and there were no grounds for His planning accordingly.

Precisely such analysis destroys Olson's explanation of every instance of God's foreknowledge of any element of the future that is morally significant, whether we have in mind the choices and acts of individuals or of nations or of the whole human race. God had no more ground for expecting Israel to "rebel and require judgments" to bring it "back to repentance and forgiveness"⁴³ than He had to expect the world to reject the Messiah. Olson's pessimistic eschatology, too, collapses under the weight of this analysis, for while Olson writes, "Because of God's knowledge of man's extreme unwillingness to receive the truth and repent of sin, God knows that the world will never be

⁴² Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-13-14.

⁴³ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, -III-14.

converted to Christ but will become more and more determined in pursuit of self gratification,"⁴⁴ his commitment to the principle of "the power of contrary choice" makes meaningless his assertion of "man's extreme unwillingness to receive the truth and repent of sin," for at any given moment any and every man might choose-since "The will determines the character or nature rather than the nature the will"-to be willing to receive the truth and repent of sin instead. This argument does not force on Olson a view he never held, it merely takes him at his word. "Moral character," he insists, "is a voluntary state of activity or conduct that takes place in the experiences and consciousnesses of moral beings. Moral character is moral action or personal action Moral character is not something back of the will causing action, not a fixed entity lodging somewhere in our being, but the action of the will itself Moral character is what we are doing with our endowments of personality and the moral light that we possess-our thoughts, attitudes, actions Moral action is, therefore, free or self-originated action, and moral character is a description of what habitual actions are taking place."⁴⁵ Even when Olson finds himself compelled to acknowledge the existence of some defining character underlying the will, he can never admit that this character ultimately obligates the will: "Depravity strongly influences, but does not compel, toward wrong action."⁴⁶ And always the internal contradiction in his view emerges again, as when he writes, shortly after the last proposition, one that presupposes the opposite relation between depravity and choice: "Moral depravity . . . is always a voluntary development which results from the wrong choices of our wills."⁴⁷ Which is it? Does depravity define choice, or does choice define depravity? Olson cannot have it both ways. The effect cannot precede its cause, nor the cause follow its effect. And the underpinning presupposition of his whole system-that the power of contrary choice is essential to free agency-determines that it is ultimately choice that defines depravity, not vice versa.

Indeed, it is precisely on this point-that man's absolute ability to repent is finally unrestricted by any internal or external cause-that Olson is most insistent. "It is *not* that man is unable to repent or respond to God's mercy that requires any special means of reconciliation Scripture speaks of the will or heart as the source of all moral actions Scripture addresses man as possessing the ability and responsibility of self-decision Scripture commands "that all everywhere should repent" and nowhere states that man is unable to do so Therefore, although man's unwillingness to repent and be conquered by the loving mercy of God is a monumental problem that God *has not been able to solve*, man's natural ability is not for he painfully possesses this."⁴⁸ "Is man able to repent? [paragraph] In our discussion of the nature of sin we saw that sin is always a voluntary state or attitude of will in supremely preferring our own happiness rather than God's and our fellowmen's. While depravity strongly influences the will and has been developed to its present strength by our own actions, nevertheless we are the author [sic] of our own actions. So-called inability is a question of 'will not' rather than 'cannot' obey God's reasonable requirements."⁴⁹

To those who deny His absolute foreknowledge, God gives this exhortation: "Remember this, and show yourselves men; recall to mind, O you transgressors. Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure'" (Isaiah 46:8-10). And lest they respond, "But that only shows that God knows what *He* has determined to do in the future," we must remind them to be consistent: if God is a free agent, and the power of contrary choice is necessary to free agency, then no earlier

⁴⁴ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-14.

⁴⁵ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-V-1-2.

⁴⁶ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-VI-5.

⁴⁷ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-VI-6.

⁴⁸ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-VII-6, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-X-9.

determination on God's part can bind Him for the future, since "The will determines the nature or character, rather than the nature the will."⁵⁰ Furthermore, according to Olson, "God is represented in the Bible as making new decisions, as pondering situations and as making up His mind in conformity thereto, and as changing His mind when certain reactions took place."⁵¹ "Many Bible passages, when taken in their natural meaning, appear to indicate that God does not have absolute foreknowledge over all His own future actions, nor over all those of His moral creatures."⁵² Yet Scripture says, "Known to God from eternity are all His works" (Acts 15:18).

When God said to Israel through Isaiah, "I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,'" it was to assure Israel that His determination to judge that kingdom for its idolatry would never change (Isaiah 46:5-7). The method he had determined for executing that judgment was to bring Cyrus and his armies against Israel (Isaiah 46:11; 44:28). But if the power of contrary choice is necessary to free agency, then God could not be certain that Israel would not repent, *en masse*, of its idolatry before the judgment came, and if He persisted in punishing Israel after its repentance, the punishment would, from Olson's viewpoint, be unjust. Neither could God be certain that Cyrus would not choose not to attack Israel, or that Cyrus's soldiers would not choose to be cowards or mutineers who rebelled against Cyrus's orders and refused to attack Israel. Yet God pronounces His intention to punish Israel, using Cyrus as His tool, with absolute certainty, as a demonstration that He is God.

3. God's knowledge is comprehensive in scope, including all things from the greatest to the least. God "counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by name" (Psalm 147:4). Yet He sees our ways and counts all our steps (Job 31:4). He knows our sitting down and our rising up; He understands our thoughts from afar; He comprehends our path and our lying down; indeed, said David, "there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether" (Psalm 139:2-4), and even "the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:30).

This is what Job learned when God laid bare Job's ignorance and revealed His own omniscience. "By what way is light diffused, or the east wind scattered over the earth? . . . Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? . . . Who has put wisdom in the mind? Or who has given understanding to the heart? Who can number the clouds by wisdom? . . . Do you know the time when the wild mountain goats bear young? Or can you mark when the deer gives birth? Can you number the months that they fulfill? Or do you know the time when they bear young? . . . Does the hawk fly by your wisdom, and spread its wings toward the south? . . . Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him?" (Job 38:24, 33, 36-37; 39:1-2, 26; 40:2)

At this rebuke Job withered. "Behold, I am vile," he said; "what shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth. Once I have spoken, but I will not answer; yes, twice, but I will proceed no further" (Job 40:4-5). But God wasn't finished with Job. He Pointed to the heart of Job's faulty understanding of God when He demanded, "Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?" (Job 40:8). Similarly, the heart of Moral Government Theology's resistance to God's foreknowledge is its belief that there can be no moral responsibility-and hence no judgment-where there is no "power of contrary choice": "The ability of personality to originate and be responsible for all actions is the foundation of moral responsibility and accountability."⁵³ And if to affirm the power of contrary choice we must deny that God is infinite, eternal, and immutable in His knowledge and in His moral excellence-if we must make God's understanding finite and His justice, holiness, goodness, and truth tenuous-then so be it. Why, Olson even goes so far as to write, "Moral government involves an

⁵⁰ Gordon C. Olson, *Holiness and Sin* (Minneapolis: Men for Missions, 1971), 24.

⁵¹ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-111-13*.

⁵² Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-III-18*.

⁵³ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-III-18*.

amazing study in contrasts as the great God is represented as appealing in humility to the heart of man, so profoundly small in his limitations, to conform to His wise and holy ways in blessed fellowship . . .⁵⁴

When God asks, "Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?" Moral Government Theology responds, Yes. Not man, but God, is humbled in this system. Man is exalted. His "freedom" is seen as the limiting factor on both God's knowledge and God's omnipotence. No philosophy more opposite that of the Scriptures can be imagined.

4. God's knowledge comprehends not only things actual but also things contingent-not only what actually has come to pass, or will come to pass, but whatever could have come to pass, or could yet come to pass, on any supposition. Thus we read of a time when David benefited from God's knowledge of contingencies: "'O LORD God of Israel,'" David prayed, "'Your servant has certainly heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah to destroy the city for my sake. Will the men of Keilah deliver me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as Your servant has heard? O LORD God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant.' And the LORD said, 'He will come down.' Then David said, 'Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul?' And the LORD said, 'They will deliver you.' So David and his men, about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah and went wherever they could go. Then it was told Saul that David had escaped from Keilah; so he halted the expedition" (1 Samuel 23:10-13).

God stated with certainty what would have ensued if His people had repented of their sins, although in fact they did not: "Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries. The haters of the LORD would pretend submission to Him, but their fate would endure forever. He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat; and with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you" (Psalm 81:13-16). His declaration depends not only on knowing what He Himself would have done but also on knowing what other free moral agents would have done-those who would have pretended submission to Him.

God told Zedekiah precisely and certainly what would happen depending on either of two choices Zedekiah could make: "Thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: 'If you surely surrender to the king of Babylon's princes, then your soul shall live; this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. But if you do not surrender to the king of Babylon's princes, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans; they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand'" (Jeremiah 38:17-18; cf. 19-23).

Jesus combined knowledge both of the contingent (but non-actual) past and of the certain future when He pronounced, "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you" (Matthew 11:20-24).

And notice this about Jesus' foreknowledge of the judgment to come on Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum: it would come because of their rejection of the truth attested by His mighty works. If they were to be judged for that rejection, it must be voluntary-it could not be among those rare occurrences in which God sets aside the normal moral freedom and accountability of moral agents, placing the will "temporarily under a law of cause and effect."⁵⁵ But if they repented of that rejection-which Olson, and with him all others who assert that the power of contrary choice, unhindered by any force external or internal, including the agent's own character, is essential to free agency, must believe they could have

⁵⁴ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-IV-6.

⁵⁵ Olson, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, T-III-15.

done at any moment in their histories-then they would no longer merit the punishment, according to Moral Government Theology, which teaches that repentance alone, without the payment of a propitiating or appeasing penalty to the demands of justice, brings forgiveness.⁵⁶ And nothing in their character, no internal force whatever-let alone any external force-could necessitate their persisting in that rejection, according to this theory. So if Jesus was right in predicting with absolute certainty that God would so judge Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum, then God had determined to do so regardless of any moral desert on the part of the cities-in which case God is unjust. But then how could Jesus have known with such certainty that God would indeed judge these cities so? After all, God, as a free agent whose will defined His character rather than vice versa, could at any time change His mind.

But Scripture will have none of such nonsense. Despite all appeals to anthropomorphic language depicting changes in God's plans-language rooted in human perspective-the testimony of Scripture is that God is perfect in His infinite, eternal, and immutable attributes, and that these attributes, both intellectual and moral, ensure that whatever He predicts will come to pass, whatever He promises He will fulfill. "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" (Numbers 23:19) It is in Jesus Christ, who is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the same yesterday, today, and forever, that "all the promises of God . . . are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us" (2 Corinthians 1:20; cf. Revelation 1:8, 11; Hebrews 13:8). All our security, all our assurance of His protection, rests on His unchanging nature, character, and will: "For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob" (Malachi 3:6). In this God alone do we dare trust. "For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, 'Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.' And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His *counsel*,⁵⁷ confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, booth sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus" (Hebrews 6:13-20).

God's Omniscience is the Doctrine of the Church through the Ages

In light of the compelling testimony of Scripture, the Church of Christ with united voice through the centuries has proclaimed the absolute omniscience-including the foreknowledge--of God, echoing the words of John, that "God . . . knows all things" (1 John 3:20). This is not to say that no professing Christian has ever denied this truth; it is Scripture, not Church history, that is inerrant and infallible. But it is to say that the unity on this doctrine is so overwhelming as to imply that anyone who departs from it does so in contempt, not respect, for the voice of the Bride.

A thorough survey of the whole of Church history on this point is neither necessary nor, in this context, possible. It should be sufficient to show that none of the chief streams of Protestant theology-Lutheran, Calvinist, Wesleyan, or Arminian-countenances any denial of God's perfect and complete foreknowledge.

⁵⁶ "A voluntary disposition of mercy and forgiveness prevails equally among all the Members of the Godhead. The Godhead are without personal vindictiveness. The problems of forgiveness are not personal but governmental. God does not require an exact payment for sin to satisfy retributive justice, but only requires that an atonement shall satisfy public justice and all the problems of a full and free reconciliation in His government of moral beings." (*The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-VII-4.*) This denial of any demand for the satisfaction of retributive (or vindictive) justice in God leads Olson to deny that Christ's atoning death was the true payment of a penalty to satisfy the justice of God: "The sacrifice of Christ is not the payment of a debt, nor is it at complete satisfaction of justice for sin. It is a Divinely-appointed [sic] condition which precedes the forgiveness of sin, just as the death of a lamb or a goat in the Mosaic economy. Christ's sufferings took the place of a penalty, so that His sufferings have the same effect in reconciling God to man, and procuring the forgiveness of sin, that the sinner's endurance of the punishment due to his sins would have had. The sufferings of Christ were not a substituted penalty, but a substitute for a penalty." (Olson, "Historical Opinions as to the Nature of Christ's Atoning Death," 3, in *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, following T-VII-10.) The atonement of Christ "Rendered satisfaction to public justice (a demonstration before all that rebellion against authority will be punished), as distinguished from retributive or vindictive justice" (*The Truth Shall Make You Free, T-VIII-1*).

⁵⁷ "New King James Version margin, "unchangeableness of His purpose."

Indeed, as we shall see, most of the creeds go far beyond simply affirming God's complete foreknowledge, affirming also His election and predestination. My citation of such passages as do so here is not intended to persuade anyone of predestination but merely to suggest that, if those who wrote the creeds believed in that, they cannot have failed to believe also in foreknowledge.

Thus, the Lutheran *Formula of Concord (1576)* says, "[T]he foreknowledge of God is nothing else than this, that God knows all things before they come to pass This foreknowledge of God extends both to good and evil men; but nevertheless it is not the cause of evil, nor is it the cause of sin, impelling man to crime" (Article XI, Affirmative, sects. ii-iii).

The *French Confession of Faith*, prepared by John Calvin and his pupil De Chandieu, revised and approved by a synod at Paris in **1559**, says, "We believe that [God] not only created all things, but that He governs and directs them, disposing and ordaining by his sovereign will all that happens in the world; not that he is the author of evil, or that the guilt of it can be imputed to him, as his will is the sovereign and infallible rule of all right and justice; but he hath wonderful means of making use of devils and sinners that he can turn to good the evil which they do, and of which they are guilty. And thus, confessing that the providence of God orders all things, we humbly bow before the secrets which are hidden to us, without questioning what is above our understanding; but rather making use of what is revealed to us in Holy Scripture for our peace and safety, inasmuch as God, who has all things in subjection to him, watches over us with a Father's care, so that not a hair of our heads shall fall without his will" (Article VIII).

The *Belgic Confession (1561)* says, "We believe that the same God, after he had created all things, did not forsake them, or give them up to fortune or chance, but that he rules and governs them, according to his holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without his appointment; nevertheless, God neither is the author of, nor can be charged with, the sins which are committed. For his power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible, that he orders and executes his work in the most excellent and just manner even when the devil and wicked men act unjustly. And as to what he doth surpassing human understanding we will not curiously inquire into it further than our capacity will admit of; but with the greatest humility and reverence adore the righteous judgments of God which are hid from us, contenting ourselves that we are disciples of Christ, to learn only those things which he has revealed to us in his Word without transgressing these limits.

"This doctrine affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father, who watches over us with a paternal care, keeping all creatures so under his power that not a hair of our head (for they are all numbered), nor a sparrow, can fall to the ground without the will of our Father, in whom we do entirely trust; being persuaded that he so restrains the devil and all our enemies that, without his will and permission, they cannot hurt us" (Article XIII).

The *Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (English Edition, **1571**; American Revision, 1801) says, "Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honor. Wherefore, they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God, be called according to God's purpose by his Spirit working in due season: they through Grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity.

"As the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God: So, for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's Predestination, is a most

dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation" (Article XVII).

The *Lambeth Articles (1595)*-a Calvinist appendix to the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, say, "God from eternity hath predestinated certain men unto life; certain men he hath reprobated. The moving or efficient cause of predestination unto life is not the foresight of faith, or of perseverance, or of good works, or of any thing that is in the person predestinated, but only the good will and pleasure of God. There is a predetermined certain number of the predestinate, which can neither be augmented nor diminished" (Articles 1-3). It is significant that despite the strong words about predestination included in the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, Calvinists in the Church of England thought it necessary to add these articles as an appendix; the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, in other words, cannot simply be written off as Calvinist.

The *Irish Articles of Religion (1615)* say, "God from all eternity did, by his unchangeable counsel, ordain whatsoever in time should come to pass; yet so, as thereby no violence is offered to the wills of the reasonable creatures, and neither the liberty nor the contingency of the second causes is taken away, but established rather.

"By the same counsel God hath predestinated some unto life, and reprobated some unto death: of both which there is a certain number, known only to God, which can neither be increased nor diminished.

"Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God whereby, before the foundations of the world were laid, he hath constantly decreed in his sacred counsel to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ unto everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honor.

"The cause moving God to predestinate unto life is not the foreseeing of faith, or perseverance, or good works, or of any thing which is in the person predestinated, but only the good pleasure of God himself. For all things being ordained for the manifestation of his glory, and his glory being to appear both in the works of his mercy and of his justice, it seemed good to his heavenly wisdom to choose out a certain number towards whom he would extend his undeserved mercy, leaving the rest to be spectacles of his justice.

"Such as are predestinated unto life be called according unto God's purpose (his spirit working in due season), and through grace they obey the calling, they be justified freely; they be made sons of God by adoption; they walk religiously in good works; and at length, by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity. But such as are not predestinated to salvation shall finally be condemned for their sins.

"The godlike consideration of predestination and our election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh and their earthly members, and drawing up their minds to high and heavenly things: as well because it doth greatly confirm and establish their faith of eternal salvation, to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God; and, on the contrary side, for curious and carnal persons lacking the spirit of Christ to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's predestination is very dangerous" (Articles 11-16).

The *Westminster Confession* says, "God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently" (Chapter V, Articles i-ii).

The *Confession of the Free-Will Baptists (1834, 1868)*, while asserting complete freedom of the human will, yet asserts the absolute foreknowledge of God: "God exercises a providential care and superintendence over all his creatures, and governs the world in wisdom and mercy, according to the testimony of his Word. God has endowed man with power of free choice, and governs him by moral laws and motives; and this power of free choice is the exact measure of his responsibility. All events are present with God from

everlasting to everlasting; but his knowledge of them does not in any sense cause them, nor does he decree all events which he knows will occur" (Chapter III).

The *Confession of the Evangelical Free Church of Geneva (1848)* says, "We believe that the beginning and the end of our salvation, our new birth, faith, sanctification, and perseverance are a gratuitous gift of the divine mercy; the true believer having been elected in Christ before the foundation of the world, according to the foreknowledge of God, the Father, in the sanctification of the Holy Ghost, to obey Jesus Christ and to be bathed in his blood" (Article X).

The *Methodist Articles of Religion (1784)* say, "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of *infinite* power, wisdom, and goodness" (Article I).

These are just a few samples of the manners in which the creeds of Protestantism affirm the foreknowledge of God, all the while maintaining that the human will is still free in the sense that it is self-determined and therefore responsible and accountable for all its choices.⁵⁸ Because some proponents of Moral Government Theology-and therefore opponents of the foreknowledge of God-represent the issue as a debate between Calvinism and Arminianism or Wesleyanism, it should be helpful also to see how Arminius and Wesley themselves thought about God's foreknowledge.

James Arminius clearly affirmed the absolute omniscience and complete foreknowledge of God as necessitated by God's very nature: "IMMUTABILITY is a pre-eminent mode of the Essence of God, by which it is void of all change; of being transferred from place to place, because it is itself its own end and good, and because it is immense; of generation and corruption; of alteration; increase and decrease; for the same reason as that by which it is incapable of suffering. (Psalm cii, 27; Mal. iii, 6; James i, 17.) Whence likewise, in the Scriptures, INCORRUPTIBILITY is attributed to God."⁵⁹ "God . . . knows all things possible, whether they be in the capability of God or of the creature; in active or passive capability; in the capability of operation, imagination, or enunciation. He knows all things that could have an existence, on laying down any hypothesis. He knows [*alia a se*] other things than himself, those which are necessary and contingent, good and bad, universal and particular, future, present and past, excellent and vile. He knows things substantial and accidental of every kind; the actions and passions, the modes and circumstances of all things; external words and deeds, internal thoughts, deliberations, counsels, and determinations, and the entities of reason, whether complex or simple. All these things, being jointly attributed to the understanding of God, seem to conduce to the conclusion, that God may deservedly be said to know things infinite. (Acts xv, 18; Heb. iv, 13; Matt. xi, 27; Psalm cxlvii, 4; Isai. xli, 22, 23; xlv, 7; Matt. x, 30; Psalm cxxxv; 1 John iii, 20; 1 Sam. xvi, 7; 1 Kings viii, 39; Psalm xciv, 11; Isai. xl, 28; Psalm cxlvii, 5; cxxxix; xciv, 9, 10; x, 13, 14.) . . . All the things which God knows, He knows neither by intelligible [species] images, nor by similitude, (for it is not necessary for Him to use abstraction and application for the purpose of understanding;) but He knows them by his own essence, and by this alone, with the exception of evil things which He knows indirectly by the opposite good things; as, through means of the habitude, privation is discovered. THEREFORE, 1. God knows himself *entirely* and *adequately* 2. He knows himself primarily; . . . 3. [*Intelligere Dei*] The act of understanding in God is his own being and essence . . . The mode by which God understands, is not that which is successive, and which is either through composition or division, or through [*discursum*] deductive argumentation; but it is simple, and through infinite intuition. (Heb. iv, 13.)

THEREFORE, 1. God knows all things from eternity; nothing [*de novo*] recently. For this new perfection would add something to His essence by which He understands all things; or his understanding would exceed His essence, if he now understood what he did not formerly understand. But this cannot happen, since he understands all things through his essence. (Acts xv, 18; Eph. i, 4.) 2. He knows all things immeasurably,

⁵⁸ This is to be distinguished from saying that the will determines the self-i.e., from affirming free self-determination. It is precisely the self-the character-that Biblical Christianity says no man can freely determine, since moral character is inherited from Adam. While Moral Government Theology affirms that the will defines the character, Biblical Christianity affirms that the character defines the *will*; choice stems from nature, not nature from choice.

⁵⁹ Arminius, Public *Disputations*, TV, xviii. Citations from Arminius are taken from *The Writings of James Arminius, 3 vols.*, trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977).

without the augmentation and decrease of the things known and of the knowledge itself. (Psalm cxlvii, 5.) 3. He knows all things immutably, his knowledge not being varied to the infinite changes of the things known. (James i, 17.) 4. By a single and *[individuo]* undivided act, not *[distractus]* being diverted towards many things but collected into himself, He knows all things. Yet he does not know them confusedly, or only universally and in general; but also in a distinct and most special manner He knows himself in himself, things in their causes, in themselves, in his own essence, in themselves *[praesenter]* as being present, in their causes antecedently, and in himself most pre-eminently. (Heb. iv, 13; 1 Kings viii, 39; Psalm cxxxix, 16, 17.) . . . The understanding of God is certain, and never can be deceived, so that He certainly and infallibly sees even future contingencies, whether He sees them in their causes or in themselves. (1 Sam. xxiii, 11, 12; Matt. xi, 21.) But, this certainty rests upon the infinite essence of God, by which in a manner the most present He understands all things The understanding of God *[causatur]* is derived from no external cause, not even from an object; though if there should not afterwards be an object, *[non sit de eo futura,]* there would not likewise be the understanding of God about it. (Isai. xl, 13, 14; Rom. xi, 33, 34.)"⁶⁰

Wesley, too, affirmed God's perfect foreknowledge, while leaving room for human free agency. Commenting on Jn. 6:64 ("For Jesus had known from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who would betray him"), he wrote, "Therefore it is plain, God does foresee future contingencies:

`But his foreknowledge causes not the fault,
Which had no less proved certain unforeknown."⁶¹

Answers to Objections

This strong testimony of the Church affirms what we saw before from Scripture: that God's omniscience is truly all-comprehensive, limited not by time or space or human freedom. Yet, as Charles Hodge noted in his *Systematic Theology*, there have been a few voices—a very few, compared with the vast body of the faithful—who have disagreed.

The Socinians, however, and some of the Remonstrants,⁶² unable to reconcile this foreknowledge with human liberty, deny that free acts can be foreknown. As the omnipotence of God is his ability to do whatever is possible, so his omniscience is his knowledge of everything knowable. But as free acts are in their nature uncertain, as they may or may not be, they cannot be known before they occur. Such is the argument of Socinus. This whole difficulty arises out of the assumption that contingency is essential to free agency. If an act may be certain as to its occurrence, and yet free as to the mode of its occurrence, the difficulty vanishes. That free acts may be absolutely certain, is plain, because they have in a multitude of cases been predicted. It was certain that the acts of Christ would be holy, yet they were free. The continued holiness of the saints in heaven is certain, and yet they are perfectly free. The foreknowledge of God is inconsistent with a false theory of free agency, but not with the true doctrine on that subject.⁶³

We saw above that the root of Gordon Olson's denial of God's foreknowledge was precisely this: that believed no choice was free that was not absolutely contingent, i.e., that was in any sense certain. For him, "the power of contrary choice" was the defining mark of free agency.

⁶⁰ Arminius, Public *Disputations*, IV, xxxi-xxxiii, xxxvi-xxxvii.

⁶¹ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, 15th ed. (New York: Carlton & Porter, n.d.), p. 232.

⁶² Even the *Articuli Arminiani sive Remonstrantia (The Five Arminian Articles; 1610)* did not go so far as to deny the foreknowledge of God. And far from their supporting other elements of Moral Government Theology, they actually deny them, affirming instead the unchangeability of God's purposes in Christ (Article I), that the unregenerate man "has not saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free will, inasmuch as he, in the state of apostasy and sin, can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do any thing that is truly good (such as saving Faith eminently is); but that it is needful that he be born again of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, or will, and all his powers, in order that he may rightly understand, think, will, and effect what is truly good" (Article III), and that "this grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of all good, even to this extent, that the regenerate man himself, without prevent or assisting, awakening, following and co-operative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good, nor withstand any temptations to evil; so that all good deeds or movements, that can be conceived, must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ" (Article IV). In other words, the Remonstrants believed in original sin, in moral inability, and in the Reformed *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), which puts regeneration before repentance, faith, and conversion in light of the inability of the unregenerate to think or do anything that is truly good, including to have saving faith. All of these truths the proponents of Moral Government Theology deny.

⁶³ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:400-401.

Olson's inability to reconcile free agency with divine foreknowledge rests on a failure to recognize two crucial distinctions. The first of these is that between, as Hodge puts it, "liberty of the will" and "liberty of the agent":

The usage . . . which makes these expressions synonymous is liable to the following objections: (1.) Predicating liberty of the will is apt to lead to our conceiving of the will as separated from the agent; as a distinct self-acting power in the soul. Or, if this extreme be avoided, which is not always the case, the will is regarded as too much detached from the other faculties of the soul, and as out of sympathy with it in its varying states. The will is only the soul willing. The soul is of course a unit. A self-determination is a determination of the will, and whatever leads to a self-decision leads to a decision of the will. (2.) A second objection to confounding these expressions is, that they are not really equivalent. The man may be free, when his will is in bondage. It is a correct and established usage of language, expressive of a real fact of consciousness, to speak of an enslaved will in a free agent. This is not a mere metaphor, but a philosophical truth. He that commits sin is the servant of sin. [Romans 6:16] Long-continued mental or bodily habits may bring the will into bondage, while the man continues a free agent. A man who has been for years a miser, has his will in a state of slavery, yet the man is perfectly free. He is self-controlled, self-determined. His avarice is himself. It is his own darling, cherished feeling. (3.) There is no use to have two expressions for the same thing; the one appropriate, the other ambiguous. What we really mean is, that the agent is free. That is the only point to which any interest is attached. The man is the responsible subject. If he be free so as to be justly accountable for his character and conduct, it matters not what are the laws which determine the operations of his reason, conscience, or will; or whether liberty can be predicated of either of those faculties separately considered. We maintain that the man is free; but we deny that the will is free in the sense of being independent of reason, conscience, and feeling. In other words, a man cannot be independent of himself, or any one of his faculties independent of all the rest.⁶⁴

The second crucial distinction Hodge makes is that between liberty and ability.

The usage which attaches the same meaning to these terms is very ancient. Augustine denied free will to man since the fall. Pelagius affirmed freedom of will to be essential to our nature. The former intended simply to deny to fallen man the power to turn himself unto God. The latter defined liberty to be the ability at any moment to determine himself either for good or evil. The controversy between Luther and Erasmus was really about ability, nominally it was about free-will. Luther's book is entitled "De Servo Arbitrio" [Of the Bondage of the Will], that of Erasmus, "De Libero Arbitrio" [Of the Freedom of the Will]. This usage pervades all the symbols of the Reformation, and was followed by the theologians of the sixteenth century. They all ascribe free agency to man in the true sense of the words, but deny to him freedom of will. To a great extent this confusion is still kept up. Many of the prevalent definitions of liberty are definitions of ability; and much that is commonly advanced to prove the liberty of the will, is really intended, and is of force only as in support of the doctrine of ability Augustine, and after him most Augustinians distinguished, (1.) The liberty of man before the fall, which was an ability either to sin or not to sin. (2.) The state of man since the fall, when he has liberty to sin, but not to good. (3.) The state of man in heaven when he has liberty to good, but not to evil. This last is the highest form of liberty, . *a felix necessitas boni*. This is the liberty which belongs to God. In the popular mind perhaps the common idea of liberty is, the power to decide for good or evil, sin or holiness. This idea pervades more or less all the disquisitions in favor of the liberty of indifference, or of power to the contrary.⁶⁵

Recognizing these two distinctions-between liberty of the will and liberty of the agent, and between liberty and ability-permits us to understand how a free agent can have a will that is in bondage, i.e., a will that is unable to choose certain things. The phrase *liberty of the agent* means that the agent-the acting person-is not forced

⁶⁴ Hodge, Systematic Theology, 11:290-291.

⁶⁵ Hodge, Systematic Theology, 11:291-292.

by anyone or anything outside himself to choose and to do as he does. He is at liberty respecting external causes; he is responsible for his choices, and he alone. But the phrase *liberty of the* will means that the will is not forced by anything outside itself-whether internal or external to the agent to choose as it does. But if the will is bound by no force outside itself, whether internal or external to the agent whose the will is, then the will is utterly arbitrary and capricious. No will of a moral agent, therefore, is truly free, for the will of every moral agent is directed by that agent's moral and intellectual character. The will may be free in respect of forces external to the agent, but in respect of forces internal to the agent, the will is bound; it cannot make decisions other than as the agent's understanding and moral commitment lead it.

This is true of God and man alike. God is "of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness"-that is, cannot look on it with pleasure (Habakkuk 1:13). Because truth is of the very essence of God, God "cannot lie" (Titus 1:2); it is "impossible for God to lie" (Hebrews 6:18). "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). God neither knows nor can be known-not in the mere sense of intellectual acknowledgement or acquaintance, but in that deeper sense of covenantal relationship and union-by anyone who does not love, "for God is love" (1 John 4:8). It is precisely because God is righteous-i.e., just-that He could *not* simply leave sin unpunished and declare innocent those who were guilty of sin, precisely because of this that He, if He were going to acquit anyone, had to provide "the gift of righteousness" by the imputation of Christ's righteousness "resulting in justification of life" so that "by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:17-19), so that Paul could write, "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:21-26). In all of these things, God the agent is absolutely free; nothing external to Him binds Him in any way. But the will of God is bound, bound by the character of God. And it is the immutable righteousness, justice, and faithfulness of God that is the ground of the believer's confidence in prayer when he conforms his prayers to the character of God, as Abraham did when he prayed for Sodom, "Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25). God is not able to will anything contrary to His own moral nature or character; His will is not free, although He Himself is free.

So also man. All men, prior to regeneration, "both Jews and Greeks . . . are all under sin" (Romans 3:9), i.e., are enslaved to it in their own natures, and that is why "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one" (Romans 3:10-12). On the contrary, all are "dead in trespasses and sins . . . the sons of disobedience . . . by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:1-3), their choices ruled by "the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness," dominated entirely by "the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts" (Ephesians 4:17-19, 22). This is why Paul says that, so long as they remain outside of Christ, they are "slaves of sin" (Romans 6:6, 17, 20), under its dominion (Romans 6:14), slaves of disobedience (Romans 6:16), "free in regard to righteousness" (Romans 6:20)-i.e., not ruled by righteousness but ruled by sin. Are they free in regard to things external to themselves? Yes. They and they alone make their choices. But are they free in regard to something internal to themselves'-to their own moral character? No. They are slaves of sin, sons of disobedience, dead in trespasses and sin, futile in thought, dark in understanding, alienated from the life of God, ignorant, blind in heart, and insensate (Ephesians 4:17-19). Thus for every unregenerate man, while he himself is free, nothing outside him forces him to choose as he does-his will is bound by his moral nature or character; it is unable to choose contrary to that nature; it

lacks precisely what Olson believes is the essence of freedom, "the power of contrary choice." His will is not free, although he himself is free.

This is why repentance, faith, and conversion are not, and cannot be, the work of unregenerate man. Regeneration must come first, for a bad tree cannot bear good fruit (Matthew 7:18); the tree must be made new, must be transformed from a bad tree to a good tree, before it can bear good fruit. The man dead in trespasses and sins must be made alive; the son of disobedience must be made a son of obedience; the child of wrath must be made a child of peace; the futile mind must be made effectual; the dark understanding must be enlightened; ignorance must be replaced by knowledge; the blind heart must be made to see; the insensate, seared conscience must be made sensate and tender. None of these transformations can be made by the unregenerate man, but all must be made in order for repentance, faith, and conversion to occur. All are what is meant by regeneration, the new birth, adoption as sons to God, being united with Christ. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). In the moment that we die to the old man, we live to the new, and "if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin" (Romans 6:5-7). All these things are done to him, not by him, as indicated in the passive verbs Paul uses: ". . . if we *have been united* together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection"; "our old man *was crucified* with Him, that the body of sin *might be done away with*, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died *has been freed* from sin And having *been set free* from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (Romans 6:5-7, 18).

The blessed goal toward which every regenerate man is moving, by the grace and faithfulness of God, is glorification, when the last bit of the "old man" will have been erased from his constitution, and he will be undividedly good, perfectly conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29-30). From that time on, his free agency will be usable only for good. Having put off corruption and put on incorruption; having put off mortality and put on immortality, he will be forever free from the sting of sin, the victory over sin at last won (1 Corinthians 15:50-57). Although he may not know now what he will be, he does know that when Christ is revealed, he will be like Him (1 John 3:2).

The solution to the whole problem of Moral Government Theology—to its denial of God's foreknowledge and moral immutability, to its denial of original sin and depravity, to its denial of the substitutionary, satisfactory atonement, to its teaching that Christ is only the occasion of salvation and not its cause, while it assigns to the individual man the cause of salvation—is to pull up its root in the misunderstanding of free agency, its confusion of liberty of the will with liberty of the agent, and of liberty with ability. Toward that end we can pray that God will graciously enable its adherents to attend carefully to, and to understand, this explanation by Charles Hodge:

It is admitted by this class of writers [namely, those who insist that free agency equals freedom of the will], and, indeed, by the whole Christian world, that men since the fall have not power to make themselves holy; much less to effect this transformation by a volition. It is admitted that saints in glory are infallibly determined by their character to holiness, yet fallen men and saints are admitted to be free. Ability may be lost, yet liberty remain. The former is lost since the fall. Restored by grace, as they say, it is to be again lost in that liberty to good which is identical with necessity. If liberty and ability are thus distinct, why should they be confounded. We are conscious of liberty. We know ourselves to be free in all our volitions. They reveal themselves to our inmost consciousness as acts of self-determination. We cannot disown them, or escape responsibility on account of them, even if we try; and yet no man is conscious of ability to change his own heart. Free agency belongs to God, to angels, to saints in glory, to fallen men, and to Satan; and it is the same in all. Yet in the strictest sense of the words, God cannot do evil; neither can Satan recover, by a volition, his lost inheritance of holiness. It is a great evil thus to confound things essentially distinct. It produces endless confusion. Augustine says, man is not free since the fall, because he cannot but sin; saints are free because they cannot sin. Inability

in the one case destroys freedom; inability in the other is the perfection of freedom! Necessity is the very opposite of liberty, and yet they are said to be identical. One man in asserting the freedom of the will, means to assert free agency, while he denies ability; another means by it full ability. It is certainly important that the same words should not be used to express antagonistic ideas.

Confusion of thought and language, however, is not the principal evil which arises from making liberty and ability identical. It necessarily brings us into conflict with the truth, and with the moral judgments of men. There are three truths of which every man is convinced from the very constitution of his nature. (1.) That he is a free agent. (2.) That none but free agents can be accountable for their character or conduct. (3.) That he does not possess ability to change his moral state by an act of the will. Now, if in order to express the fact of his inability, we say, that he is not a free agent, we contradict his consciousness; or, if he believe what we say, we destroy his sense of responsibility. Or if we tell him that because he is a free agent, he has power to change his heart at will, we again bring ourselves into conflict with his convictions. He knows he is a free agent, and yet he knows that he has not the power to make himself holy. *Free agency is the power to decide according to our character; ability is the power to change our character by a volition.* The former, the Bible and consciousness affirm belongs to man in every condition of his being; the latter, the Bible and consciousness teach with equal explicitness does not belong to fallen man. The two things, therefore, ought not to be confounded.⁶⁶

Hodge goes on to explain another confusion, that between self-determination and self-determination of the will. By the latter is intended by those who use the phrase the denial "that the will is determined by the antecedent state of the mind, and to affirm that it has a self-determining power, independent of anything preexisting or coexisting," i.e., the affirmation "that as the will has a self-determining power it may decide against all motives internal or external, against all influences divine or human, so that its decisions cannot be rendered inevitable without destroying their liberty. The very essence of liberty, they say, is power to the contrary. In other words, a free act is one performed with the consciousness that under precisely the same circumstances, that is, in the same internal as well as external state of the mind, it might have been the opposite. According to the [Augustinian] doctrine, the will is determined; according to the other, it determines itself. In the one case, our acts are or may be inevitably certain and yet be free. In the other, in order to be free, they must be uncertain."⁶⁷

But beyond all the confusion of terms, there remains "a real difference [of understanding] as to the nature of free agency; and that difference concerns this very point: may the acts of free agents be rendered inevitably certain without destroying their liberty?"⁶⁸ He then states points as to which the two sides in the debate are agreed: (1) "that man is a free agent, in such a sense as to be responsible for his character and acts"; (2) that "the nature of free agency . . . supposes both reason and active power"-Le., that brutes and maniacs are not free agents; (3) "that in all important cases, men act under the influence of motives"; (4) that the will is not determined with certainty by *external* motives"; (5) "that the word will is to be taken in its proper, restricted sense. The question is not, whether men have power over their affections, their likes and dislikes. No one carries the power of the will so far as to maintain that we can, by a volition, change our feelings. The question concerns our volitions alone. It is the ground or reason of acts of self-determination that is in dispute. And, therefore, it is the will considered as the faculty of self-determination, and not as the seat of the affections, that comes into view."⁶⁹

The whole question therefore is, whether, when a man decides to do a certain thing, his will is determined by the previous state of his mind. Or, whether, with precisely the same views and feelings,

⁶⁶ Hodge, Systematic Theology, 11:292-294.

⁶⁷ Hodge, Systematic Theology, H:294, 296.

⁶⁸ Hodge, Systematic Theology, 11:296.

⁶⁹ Hodge, 69 Systematic Theology, II:297.

his decisions may be one way at one time, and another at another. That is, whether the will, or rather the agent, in order to be free, must be undetermined.⁷⁰

Hodge then launches his argument that free agency is consistent with certainty-and therefore with moral inability on the part of unregenerate man, with moral immutability on the part of God, and with God's foreknowledge on the part of man's choices:

It is certainly a strong argument in favor of that view of free agency, which makes it consistent with certainty, or which supposes that an agent may be determined with inevitable certainty as to his acts, and yet those acts remain free, that it suits all classes or conditions of free agents. To deny free agency to God, would be to deny Him personality and to reduce Him to a mere power or principle. And yet, in all the universe, is there anything so certain as that God will do right? But if it be said that the conditions of existence in an infinite being are so different from what they are in creatures, that it is not fair to argue from the one to the other, we may refer to the case of our blessed Lord. He had a true body and a reasonable soul. He had a human will; a mind regulated by the same laws as those which determine the intellectual and voluntary acts of ordinary men. In his case, however, although there may have been the metaphysical possibility of evil (though even that is a painful hypothesis), still it was more certain that He would be without sin than that the sun or moon should endure But if it be objected even to this case, that the union of the divine and human natures in the person of our Lord places Him in a different category from ourselves, and renders it unfair to assume that what was true in his case must be true in ours; without admitting the force of the objection, we may refer to the condition of the saints in heaven. They, beyond doubt, continue to be free agents; and yet their acts are, and to everlasting will be, determined with absolute and inevitable certainty to be good. Certainty, therefore, must be consistent with free agency. What can any Christian say to this? Does he deny that the saints in glory are free, or does he deny the absolute certainty of their perseverance in holiness? Would his conception of the blessedness of heaven be thereby exalted? Or would it raise his ideas of the dignity of the redeemed to believe it to be uncertain whether they will be sinful or holy? We may, however, come down to our present state of existence. Without assuming anything as to the corruption of our nature, or taking for granted anything which Pelagius would deny, it is a certain fact that all men sin. There has never existed a mere man on the face of the earth who did not sin. When we look on a newborn infant we know that whatever may be uncertain in its future, it is absolutely, inevitably certain that, should it live, it will sin. In every aspect, therefore, in which we can contemplate free agency, whether in God, in the human nature of Christ, in the redeemed in heaven, or in man here on earth, we find that it is compatible with absolute certainty.⁷¹

If free agency-moral responsibility for our choices'-is consistent with the bondage of the will rightly understood, a bondage to the moral character of the agent whose will does the choosing, then it is consistent with certainty. And if it is consistent with certainty, then it is consistent with foreknowledge. No appeal to the free agency of man, therefore, is an adequate ground for denying the absolute foreknowledge of God.⁷²

Conclusion

I believe the foregoing objectively shows both the truth of God's foreknowledge as revealed in Scripture and its compatibility with human free agency and moral responsibility. But what is objectively adequate is not always, and for all people, subjectively adequate, for various reasons having to do with our own weaknesses in

⁷⁰ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 11:297-298.

⁷¹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 11:298-299.

⁷² I have seen another argument for the incompatibility of free agency with foreknowledge, a strange and ill-defined notion that what is foreknown somehow cannot be significant. Clark Pinnock writes, "I found I could not shake off the intuition that such a total omniscience would necessarily mean that everything we will ever choose in the future will have been already spelled out in the divine knowledge register, and consequently the belief that we have truly significant choices to make would seem to be mistaken." (Clark H. Pinnock, "From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989], 25.) I am unaware of anything in Scripture that indicates that "truly significant choices" are only those that surprise God; the significance of choices, according to Scripture, arises from whether they are right or wrong, whether they conform to or violate the law of God, whether they glorify Him or rebel against Him, whether they help or hurt our neighbors.

thought and feeling. What, then, can I say to someone who, having read and considered all of the above, still finds himself undecided? I return to the beginning. With Augustine I say, "if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, `Humility.'"

Stephen Charnock, in his classic work *The Existence and Attributes of God*, put it well:

But what if the foreknowledge of God, and the liberty of the will, cannot be fully reconciled by man? Shall we therefore deny a perfection in God to support a liberty in ourselves? Shall we rather fasten ignorance upon God, and accuse him of blindness, to maintain our liberty? That God doth foreknow everything, and yet that there is liberty in the rational creature, are both certain; but how fully to reconcile them, may surmount the understanding of man. Some truths the disciples were not capable of bearing in the days of Christ; and several truths our understandings cannot reach as long as the world doth last; yet, in the mean time, we must, on the one hand, take heed of conceiving God ignorant, and on the other hand, of imagining the creature necessitated; the one will render God imperfect, and the other will seem to render him unjust, in punishing man for that sin which he could not avoid, but was brought into by a fatal necessity. God is sufficient to render a reason of his own proceedings, and clear up all at the day of judgment; it is a part of man's curiosity, since the fall, to be prying into God's secrets, things too high for him; whereby he sings his own wings, and confounds his own understanding. It is a cursed affectation that runs in the blood of Adam's posterity, to know as God, though our first father smarted and ruined his posterity in that attempt; the ways and knowledge of God are as much above our thoughts and conceptions as the heavens are above the earth (Isa. Iv. 9), and so sublime, that we cannot comprehend them in their true and just greatness; his designs are so mysterious, and the ways of his conduct so profound, that it is not possible to dive into them. The force of our understandings is below his infinite wisdom, and therefore we should adore him with an humble astonishment, and cry out with the apostle, (Rom. xi. 33): "O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" Whenever we meet with depths that we cannot fathom, let us remember that he is God, and we his creatures; and not be guilty of so great extravagance, as to think that a subject can pierce into all the secrets of a prince, or a work understand all the operations of the artificer. Let us only resolve not to fasten anything on God that is unworthy of the perfection of his nature, and dishonorable to the glory of his majesty; nor imagine that we can ever step out of the rank of creatures to the glory of the Deity, to understand fully everything in his nature.⁷³

Ask yourself three simple questions: Are there things regarding the conduct of foreign and domestic policy about which you expect the President and his advisors to understand more than you do, granted your limited position and access to facts? How much more ought you to expect that there are things about God beyond your understanding? Rather than making the limits of your understanding the limits of God's ability, does it not make better sense to make the greatness of God the limit of your protest?

Indeed, the final resolution to all such problems is not to be found in the intellect. So long as we are determined to understand everything completely, we will be trapped by the inescapable facts of our own sinfulness and creaturehood. The resolution is to be found in the will—a will that needs transforming by the powerful grace of God. It is to be found in repentance. Job's response to God's demonstration of His transcendent power and wisdom must be ours:

I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, "Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?" Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, "I will question you, and you shall answer Me." I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

⁷³ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 11681] 1979 rpt.), 1:450-451.