



CHAPTER 2

GOD IS IN CONTROL:

SO WHY IS THE WORLD SUCH A MESS?

Perhaps one of the most common sayings of folk Christianity is: “God is in control.” The day after I wrote the first draft of this chapter I happened to see a car with a bumper sticker that read “Relax! God is in control!” Often this saying is accompanied by the additional phrase, “so this was God’s will” (where “this” refers to some calamity). Now, some Christians have given the matter a lot of thought and decided that the Bible does teach and they do believe that God controls everything that happens down to the tiniest details, including sin, evil, and calamities. They are usually Calvinists—followers of the

sixteenth-century Reformer John Calvin and his later interpreters such as American Puritan Jonathan Edwards. Such people, including some popular Christian writers and speakers (e.g., John Piper, R. C. Sproul) have their reasons for believing that God is in control and that everything that happens is in some sense God's will.

When I was teaching theology at a leading evangelical college, then U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop spoke in chapel. Since he was a leading crusader against tobacco smoking and chewing, I thought he would talk about the importance of taking care of our bodies. But instead he spoke for forty minutes on the subject "God Killed My Son." I knew that Koop was a member of Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia—a leading conservative Calvinist congregation pastored by one of my own seminary professors (James Montgomery Boice, who has since died). Koop expressed classical Calvinism in its starkest form. He related how his college-age son was killed in a mountain climbing accident a few years earlier and said that only his belief that God took his son's life gave him any comfort. If God took his son's life, it wasn't really an accident but an event filled with meaning and purpose even if those are hidden for now.

Koop believed that his son's death, like every other event, was planned and rendered certain by God in order to contribute to some yet mysterious greater good that God is unfolding through world history. For Koop and others like him, "God is in control, so whatever happens is God's will" is not just a trite saying. It is no cliché. It is a necessary expression of a deeply held belief in God's providence as all-encompassing and meticulous. As Calvinist author R. C. Sproul likes to say to underscore the necessity of God's total control of all things for his sovereignty: "If there is one single molecule in this universe running around loose, totally free of God's sovereignty, then we have no guarantee that a single promise of God will ever be fulfilled.... Without sovereignty God cannot be God. If we reject divine sovereignty then we must embrace atheism" (*Chosen by God* [Tyndale, 1986], pp. 26–27).

QUESTIONING AN APPARENT CONTRADICTION

For most Christians who say “God is in control and therefore this calamity is God’s will,” it is a problematic statement. That’s because of other things they believe. During my twenty-some years of teaching Christian college students (and now seminary students) most of those who expressed this sentiment were not Calvinists. They believe strongly in free will, and most of them believe that God is unconditionally good and a God of love for all people (and especially children!). They would reject unequivocally the Calvinist idea that God’s ultimate purpose in creation is to glorify himself even at the expense of children’s deaths in gas chambers and the eternal suffering of some prechosen people in hell. When asked about the Holocaust or the Asian tsunami (or the horrible aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which hit the southern U.S. just days before I am writing this), most of them would not attribute them to God’s causal activity. And yet, like Calvinists (and Muslims), they continue to say in the face of every awful thing that happens, “God willed it.”

Why would a non-Calvinist, a person who believes in freedom of will and God’s benevolence toward all people, want to say that everything that happens is God’s will without qualification or equivocation? It seems that this might be just a leftover attitude from the days when many of their spiritual ancestors were Calvinists. When such people switched from belief in God’s all-determining rule to belief in creaturely freedom and from belief in divine determinism to belief in God as benevolent parent, they failed to change their platitudes about the reason things go wrong in the world.

Such folk Christians should stop and ask themselves whether they believe the fall of Adam and Eve in the primeval garden that led to the horrors of human history was God’s plan and whether God willed it to happen. They should examine whether they believe Hitler was raised up by God as a scourge against God’s own people the Jews (and others). Did God foreordain the Holocaust

and manipulate the wills of its perpetrators? What about the twisted child abuser who kidnaps, tortures, and kills an innocent child? Does God foreordain and render that certain, or is it against his will?

If your answers to those questions add up to the idea that God does *not* foreordain, render certain, or cause such horrible deeds, then perhaps you should consider ceasing to say “God is in control; this was his will” when confronted by a terrible evil or horrendous disaster. If God is good in any sense analogous to our best understandings of personal goodness, what sense does it make to say that he controls history in an unlimited and unqualified fashion? That would mean he controls sin and evil as well. Of course, if by “control” one only means that God limits and governs, then all Christians would probably say God controls history. Nothing can happen without God’s permission; that’s pretty clear from Scripture and Christian tradition. It would seem to be part and parcel of the very idea of God. But when most people say “God is in control” and “God willed it,” they mean that whatever has happened, however calamitous and evil, has been foreordained, planned and willed by God. If they don’t mean that, they should be a bit more cautious and say rather that God has allowed it to happen.

The next question, of course, is “Why?” Equally sincere and astute Christians can go in different directions in answering this question, but they should be prepared to say something. Perhaps God can’t always prevent even innocent suffering because he has self-imposed rules that govern his relationship with fallen creation. What would happen to free will if God always interfered with its consequences? This would be a different world if God did not allow the fallen wills of humans to do their work.

There are various ways of answering why God allows something evil or calamitous to happen. We all know of good and loving parents who allow their growing up children to make mistakes so that they can learn from them; they feel that the only way to stop them would be to control them by taking away their responsible freedom. God may have covenanted to partner with his creatures

in history under certain rules by which he cannot prevent everything bad that happens. Perhaps God has decided that in most circumstances the “rain” (whether needed or destructive) will fall on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

This week, a week after Hurricane Katrina destroyed most of New Orleans, many people are asking, “Why did God let this happen?” Some Christians are saying, “It was God’s will; trust God because he is always in control.” That doesn’t exactly sit well with most people who, for good biblical reasons, have trouble picturing the God of Jesus Christ wreaking death and destruction on children and families. A few people are daring to say, “God never intended people to build cities near oceans below sea level; that’s our ancestors’ doing and ours for living there.” It may sound like blaming the victims, but in fact it is simply accepting our corporate responsibility for the evil in the world. Much, if not all, destruction of all kinds could be prevented if people lived lives of good common sense according to God’s revealed will and were not ruled by selfish passion and pride.

MUCH, if not all, destruction of all kinds could be prevented if people lived lives of good common sense according to God’s revealed will and were not ruled by selfish passion and pride.

A similar case can be made about HIV/AIDS (and many diseases). God revealed his will about human sexuality, and it is against sexual promiscuity. While many people living with and dying of AIDS never engaged in promiscuous sex (or any sex for that matter!), experts are quite sure the virus entered into humanity via sexual perversion and promiscuity. Is AIDS, then, a judgment from God? Not exactly. But only folk religion answers that tough question with a knee-jerk and unequivocal “Yes!” or “No!” Why did God lay down laws for all humankind to live by? (I’m not here asking about laws only for Israel to keep its covenant with God.) Just to show who’s in charge? Because God is a killjoy? Hardly. Perhaps God foresaw the consequences of sexual perversion and promiscuity and accordingly forbade them.

Why is there no mention of masturbation in the Bible? Could it be because God saw no particular harmful consequences arising from it? This is not to say that all masturbation is good or even neutral! Obsessive-compulsive sexual habits are something to avoid—they fall under the general heading of sexual perversion which in the New Testament is called *porneia* and is condemned.

GOD'S GOODNESS, POWER, AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

All this is simply to say that pat answers to difficult questions are seldom helpful. Simply to go around saying “It’s God’s will” in the face of every calamity, disease, accident, death, or war is to raise more questions. To go around saying “God is in control” is the same; it raises more questions than it answers. What kind of control does God exercise? How is it compatible with his goodness? What does “control” mean in a context of sin and evil and their consequences?

Once again, of course, if a person is truly a Calvinist and is prepared to explain and defend God’s all-determining providential governance of all events, he or she has some warrant for saying these things. In that case they are not thoughtless platitudes that conflict with other beliefs. Nevertheless, even for the Calvinist further explanation is required. Does God will everything in the same way? Does God’s all-encompassing control of history conflict with human responsibility? Are humans, then, mere robots? Why are people held responsible by God for doing what they are foreordained to do? What does God’s goodness mean in a world where God plans and in some way (however indirectly) causes horrors like the Holocaust?

The Calvinist view of God’s providence and power seems to lead into some thorny thickets of theological questioning. A Calvinist friend of mine wrote a book against a theological belief he considers nearly heretical. He declared that it diminishes God’s glory and therefore is insulting and demeaning to God. I asked him whether he believes, as most Calvinists do, that God foreordains and renders certain everything for his glory. He affirmed it. Then

I asked him (quite honestly and with good intentions) how any belief, however heretical, can diminish God's glory if God fore-ordained it *for his glory*. See the problem? I still don't have an answer to that question.

In other words, even the Calvinist who declares that God is in control and that everything that happens is God's will needs to examine and explain further. People should not be faulted for asking tough questions about that. The father of Calvinism once brushed such objections and questions aside as little more than the barking of dogs. But is it really? Shouldn't he have taken the questions about God's goodness and human responsibility more seriously? I think he should have.

A basic rule of reflective Christianity is that you should strive to make your belief system biblical and coherent. In other words, if one of your beliefs conflicts with the Bible, you should certainly revise it. Unfortunately, it's not always easy to tell whether a belief conflicts with the Bible. The Bible is open to many interpretations. But there's another test of the truth of beliefs: consistency among them. If a person believes that God is benevolent, good, and loving and that human beings are responsible for what they do (under most circumstances) and liable to punishment for their acts, it makes little sense also to believe that God controls everything and that everything is according to God's will. Why? Because "everything" (unless further qualified) includes the first evil inclination in a creature's mind and heart (Satan's first rebellious thought in heaven before he fell and Adam's and Eve's first leanings toward sin) as well as all of the evil consequences that flow from that.

A basic rule of reflective Christianity is that you should strive to make your belief system biblical and coherent.

Is God the author of sin and evil? Calvinists generally say no. But is that consistent with what they say about God's all-determining control? Non-Calvinists generally also deny that God is the author of sin and evil. But then why do they say "God is in control" and "Everything is God's will"? Such inconsistency cries

out for resolution; the paradox needs relief. (In chapter 1 I discussed paradoxes and inconsistencies at some length.)

GOD IS IN CHARGE (EVEN IF NOT IN CONTROL)

Hopefully you will give careful thought to what you mean the next time you are tempted to say blithely, “God is in control.” I have adopted a different way of expressing God’s providential governance over history. I say, “God is in charge even though he doesn’t control everything.” It takes a few more words to say and it raises eyebrows. I’m then ready to explain what I mean. One student challenged my axiom and asked for further explication. I said “It’s like this class; as the teacher I’m in charge, but clearly I’m not in control.” The students laughed. They got the idea.

Of course, God is not exactly like a teacher and the world is not exactly like a classroom. But there may be an analogy. When I open a class at the beginning of the semester I have only good intentions for everyone and I do my best throughout the semester to help students achieve the goals and objectives of the course. I am interested in their well-being, including that they all get good grades. I try to run a fairly tight “ship,” as it were, and keep the class sessions civil and organized. But much is also up to the students. Every teacher knows that students have a great deal of “say” in how a course evolves and how it ends up. No teacher in his or her right mind would try to manipulate the students; providing challenge and support is the most we should do.

What do students think of a teacher who begins the course by saying, “Because I grade on a curve it is predetermined that one fifth of you will fail”? Few students consider such a teacher benevolent. So, trying to be a good teacher, I do my best to remain “in charge” of the classroom and the entire course. I take responsibility for much of what happens. I guide and steer and prod and urge and offer all kinds of aids to learning. But at the end of the semester some students do poorly grade-wise. Whose fault is that? It would be my fault if I had not done my best to help them or if my expectations were simply unreasonably high. It would especially

be my fault if I “controlled” the class and manipulated things so that some would fail.

Is it right to think of God along similar lines? Why not? I submit that most of the early church fathers (before Augustine) thought more or less this way. God is the creator and ruler of the universe, but he has given the terrible gift of moral freedom to human beings who have misused it. The world has spun out of God’s control because he allowed it to happen. But he remains in charge. He has not abandoned his creation but seeks its redemption. Along the way many things happen that grieve God’s heart and are against his will.

Perhaps we should make a distinction between God’s antecedent will and God’s consequent will. Before and apart from humanity’s fall into sin no such distinction was necessary. Since sin entered the world, everything that happens is according to God’s consequent will in that he allows it. The only alternative would be to abolish free will. God limits evil and steers the course of history along certain lines according to his covenant with people. But he does not cause everything either directly or indirectly. (Of course, nothing would exist without God’s creative causation, but here we are talking about his causality of specific events.)

Some people object to my formula that God is in charge but not in control because they think it undermines his power. I disagree. God has the power to stop anything from happening; he just doesn’t always exercise that power. God limits the exercise of his power for the sake of real, free relationships with people and for the sake of creatures’ moral responsibility. (In this respect my teacher and class analogy breaks down; unlike God I am not omnipotent!)

Others object to my formula because they think it robs them of the comfort of believing that everything has a purpose. Perhaps they should become Calvinists (in which case they would have to live with another set of problems). I wonder

GOD limits the exercise of his power for the sake of real, free relationships with people and for the sake of creatures’ moral responsibility.

what comfort they derive from believing that God controls everything. What comfort is in believing that God manipulates events so that children contract leukemia and die slow, agonizing deaths? What comfort comes with believing that Hitler was an instrument in the hands of God? Sure, these beliefs may invest meaning and purpose in such otherwise absurd events, but what do they say about God?

I don't find such a "hidden God" (as Luther called the side of God that wreaks havoc and evil on the world) comforting at all. Such a God is not revealed in Jesus Christ and is more like a terrible tyrant than a loving heavenly Father. If there is a "hidden God" as some believe and as at least one hymn proclaims ("Behind a frowning providence God hides a smiling face"), how can we trust God to be good? How can we believe in God's promises? Perhaps part of God's hiddenness is that he doesn't keep his promises. Once the "hidden God" idea is introduced, all kinds of questions pop up out of the Pandora's box it opens.

I prefer simply to say that God is in charge but not in control. It's less misleading, given everything that I believe, than "God is in control." I also prefer to say that some things happen against God's will; God does not always get his way. It's less problematic than "Everything is according to God's will." Of course, I add that God *could* be in control, but he chooses not to be. And I add that whatever happens is at least allowed by God.

If pushed to explain how allowing the Holocaust is better than foreordaining it, I appeal to common experience. There are many things I have to allow because to stop them would require violence beyond my moral ability to exercise. I have agreed to live within the social contract that says I cannot act as my own police force. I have to allow the duly appointed police to do their work. I cannot be a vigilante. As my daughters matured and entered adulthood, I had to let go of my attempts to control them. I had to let them make mistakes—even when I could have stopped them—so they could learn from them. So God restrains himself for a time so that human history can be what it is—an enterprise involving free-

dom and responsibility. (In chapter 5 we'll discuss how this idea of God's self-restraint and human freedom applies to the thorny problem of finding God's will for life.)

GOD IS NOT NICE

It is important that we critically examine another platitude often mouthed by well-meaning Christians, one that is just as much folk religious as "God is in control." It arises at the opposite end of the spectrum of folk beliefs about God and is often an overreaction to belief in God's all-determining control of history. More than a few times I've heard students and church people say about biblical narratives of God's wrath, "My God would never do that!" Another way this sentimental idea of God manifests is in response to questions about God's role in natural disasters including plagues, famines, and floods: "God would never do that."

Am I contradicting myself when I suggest that this also may be too facile? I don't think so. Although God is good, biblical revelation shows us that God's patience has its limits and that he does occasionally interfere in human history in terrible ways. I'm always a bit put off when people assert confidently that a certain calamity has nothing to do with God. Really? How can we know that?

True, we can be sure that God does not intend to harm innocents; he is not like some arbitrary tyrant who wipes out whole villages including children just because he's angry or because he wants to display his power and displeasure. But if God is going to pronounce his judgment against, say, a city or country, how could he do it without risking what is euphemistically known as "collateral damage"? What if a whole city became so horribly corrupt that even the children were living and dying in squalor and abuse and suffering day in and day out because of the adults' evil decisions and actions? Might it be merciful of God to wipe that city off the face of the earth? After all, God is God and not subject to the laws he has imposed on us. I, for example, am not allowed to shoot at a fleeing criminal. But a police officer is—under the right circumstances.

This offends many people's sensibilities about God. They're not the ones who say "God is in control." (I've already offended them!) They are the ones who have a sentimental notion of God as "nice." But where does the Bible say that God is nice? As C. S. Lewis said through one of the characters of the *Chronicles of Narnia* (about the lion, Aslan, who symbolizes Christ), God is good but not safe. So I say God is good but not nice. "Nice" is a human convention; it is a way we get along with each other and is completely compatible with indifference. I'm nice because that's what is expected of me. (Of course, I like to think I'm also just a nice person!) But as one of my former colleagues liked to say, "It's nice to be nice but it's better to be helpful."

Nice can be a way of putting people off; it can be a tool of manipulation or a means to avoid confrontation. I'm not saying nice is bad; in most circumstances it's okay. But it isn't a virtue. Kindness is a virtue, but that's not the same as niceness. Nice implies polite and can be superficial. Kind suggests a more sincere care and giving. Nice is incompatible with tough love; kind isn't. By all biblical accounts God is kind, but nothing in the Bible suggests that God is nice. God's kindness can be terrible as revealed in some of his Old Testament acts against the enemies of his people. Sometimes in order to be kind to one group of people I have to be tough toward another group. So it is with God.

We do God no favors by creating him in our own image. Someone quipped that God created humans in his image and ever since humans have been returning the favor. Too many folk Christians

WE do God no favors by creating him in our own image.

like to think that God is like a nice old grandfather who would never harm a flea. That may be sentimental and sweet, but it is hardly the biblical picture of God, who is often a warrior and a terrible avenger. The God of the Bible is

longsuffering and shows loving-kindness, but only up to a point. I think it is right to believe that God is too great and good to lose his temper; losing one's temper is a trait of human frailty. So, when the biblical narratives reveal God wreaking vengeance on people by

destroying cities and whole groups of people, we should not interpret that as God simply “losing it,” so to speak. Rather, we should think that God has good reasons for destroying people when he does that. Frankly and put bluntly, they needed destroying. In Texas there’s a common response when certain kinds of people are killed (such as a child or wife abuser): “He needed killin’.”

Our modern sensibilities go against thinking that God kills people. But if we take the Bible seriously, it’s hard to avoid. We have to suppose they “needed killin’,” as harsh as that sounds.

But can we ever know today what God is doing or how God is involved (if at all) in a natural disaster? I don’t think so. But we shouldn’t make flat-out claims such as “God didn’t have anything to do with that” or “My God wouldn’t do something like that.” How can we know that? We can be sure that God does not cause people to sin, but we can’t be sure that God does not himself occasionally reach the end of his patience and send a hurricane or an earthquake.

WE should be careful about making blanket statements about what God does or does not do.

After all, much of the Bible indicates he will do that at the end of history! What warrant do we have for saying confidently he doesn’t do it before then? We should be careful about making blanket statements about what God does or does not do. Some things we can rule out (or in) based on his own self-revelation and the character we know him to have because of that revelation. But we have no grounds for saying that God would never cause the calamity that befalls a city or country.

EXAMINING BELIEFS ABOUT GOD

The point of this chapter, as of the whole book, is to encourage Christians to stop and examine their platitudes and clichés as well as the beliefs that underlie them. Too often they are not based on any thought processes and are unexamined. They are borrowed from others because they sound good. Perhaps they bring some level of comfort. But too often they raise more questions than they

answer and plant ideas about God in people's minds that are confusing, inconsistent, unbiblical, or even dishonoring to God.

I'm not arguing that it is always wrong to say "God is in control," or "This is God's will." I am arguing that if we say that, we should be prepared to explain and qualify. Perhaps we should always offer such qualifications and explanations knowing that such simple sayings raise questions our hearers may not have the courage to ask. But I have found it better to say "God is in charge but not in control," and "God allows whatever happens but not everything is according to his perfect will." Adding just a few words makes a world of difference. Even then, however, I often find it necessary to go on to explain and defend in order to avoid confusion and offense.

Reflective Christianity means I can't even settle comfortably with these nuanced statements about God. After all, as emphasized in the introduction, no theology or system of belief is ever absolutely correct and complete. But for now, I find these expressions better than alternatives with which I am familiar. Yet I remain open to correction; I continue to examine whether there might be better ways of expressing God's involvement in world history and people's lives. I don't think there is a perfect, permanent Christian language. Our ways of expressing faith in God and explaining his ways will continue to evolve as we strive for deeper understanding. Maybe ten years from now my own study of Scripture together with my own life experiences and my rational thought processes will lead me to revise my preferred way of expressing these things. I remain open to that. What I am confident will never change is my faith in God's goodness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you consider yourself a Calvinist or inclined that way? If so, what is your belief about God's sovereign control over history? If not, what is your belief about it? (What default viewpoint tends to govern your approach to this subject?)

2. When have you heard people say “God is in control,” and “This was God’s will”? What events provoked those kinds of sentiments? Having read this chapter, how would you evaluate the appropriateness of these statements to the events?
3. Do you think AIDS is God’s judgment? In what sense? Did you have an emotional reaction to the section on God and AIDS? If so, what was it?
4. What kind of response do you have (initially and perhaps after some thought) to the formula “God is in charge but not in control”? Does it help you think more clearly about God’s providence, or does it seem to detract too much from God’s majesty?
5. Before reading this chapter did you tend to think of God as “nice”? How did that translate into your view of God and events in the world? After reading the chapter what do you think about God’s “niceness”?
6. What are some other unexamined beliefs about God besides those discussed in this chapter? What do you think about them now? What might you say to a person who spouts unexamined or simplistic clichés about God such as those?